MRS. MARTIN'S MAN

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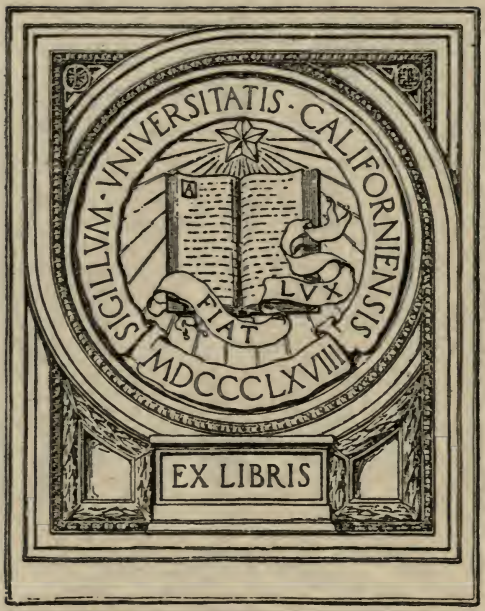
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TO MY WIFE

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CHAPTER I

Mrs. Martin could not sit still any longer. She rose from her seat behind the counter, and called her daughter Agnes from the door of the shop.

"I'm going home now, Aggie," she said, trying to speak firmly. A slight flickering of the tone startled the girl, and she glanced sharply at her mother.

"Are you not well, ma?" she asked anxiously.

"I'm well enough," Mrs. Martin replied, putting on her coat and hat. "I'll leave you to look after the shop. It's early hours yet, an' you'll not be hampered for the want of help. I'll mebbe tell Jamesey to step down an' lend you a hand when he comes home."

The girl looked at her mother in astonishment. She could not remember a single occasion on which she had left the shop before the hour of closing, and it seemed to her that this sudden resolve to quit the shop on Saturday, the busiest day of the week, denoted that some evil thing had happened.

"But what ails you, ma? . . ." she began to say.

Mrs. Martin interrupted her quickly. "Nothin' ails me!" she said, and then, almost as if she feared that her daughter would ask other questions of her, she walked out of the shop.

She walked along the Shore Road towards the railway station. When she was approaching McConkey's Hotel, she turned to look back at the shop. Aggie was standing staring after her.

"She'll wonder at me not goin' home the way I always go," she said to herself, and for a moment she hesitated. Then she murmured, "Well, it doesn't matter anyway!" and continued on her way to the station.

A train from Belfast had arrived at Ballyreagh a few moments before Mrs. Martin came to the station door. She stood back a little from the path, and eagerly looked into the faces of the passengers as they came out of the station into the street, but none of them was the face for which she sought. When all the passengers had passed out of the station, she went through the door and walked towards the barriers. There was a confusion of luggage and children and agitated women on the platform. The summer holidays were coming to an end, and the town-dwellers, browned and reddened by the sun and the wind, were returning to Belfast. She forced her way into the noisy, bewildered crowd until she came to an elderly porter, long suffering and slow to wrath, who was endeavouring to persuade a stout woman to believe that by no chance could the three-ten train go out of the station before three-ten.

"It'll mebbe go out after three-ten," he said to her in a tone which indicated that the temper of a railway porter is not imperishable, "but it'll not go out afore that time!"

Mrs. Martin touched him on the arm, and he turned towards her with a movement of im-

patience. "No, mem, it'll not! . . ." he said mechanically, and then, seeing her, he stopped and smiled. "Ah, it's you, is it?" he said. "I declare to me good God I'm near wore out wi' all these ould women! I never saw such an a pack in all my born days! The questions they ask me, an' the way they keep on askin' them after I've give them their answer! . . ."

"Did you see anyone would be lookin' for me?" she asked in a quiet voice.

"I did not," he replied. "Not this day nor any other day that I mind of!"

"You're sure?"

"I wish to God I was as sure of heaven! Ah, I'm sure right enough! Oh, aye! were you lookin' for anyone in partic'lar?"

"No," she replied hesitatingly. "No, not anyone in partic'lar. I was half expectin' a friend to come the day. That was all. You're brave an' busy! . . ."

"Aye, I am that. Who were you expectin', Mrs. Martin?"

"Och, he'll mebbe not come," she answered evasively. "It doesn't matter anyway. What time'll the next train be in from Belfast?"

"There'll not be one till half-after four now!"

"Thank you," she said.

She turned to go away, but the old porter called after her.

"Was it your son Jamesey you were expectin'?" he said.

"No," she replied, "it was not. It was some one else!"

"Ah, well, you needn't tell me if you don't want

to," he exclaimed huffily, and then turned at the demand of a passenger to explain the devious ways of the Belfast and County Down Railway in a voice that had more of asperity in it than was customary with him.

Mrs. Martin walked out of the station. She stood for a few moments in a state of indecision, and then crossed the road and stood with her arms resting on the sea-wall. The press of day-trippers and holiday-makers disturbed her. There was to be an open-air concert in the evening, and the railway company had reduced the fares from Belfast to attract a crowd to it. She walked along the road to the pier, at the end of which the light-house stood, but before she passed the line of houses, she turned to the right and walked parallel with the railway lines. She went past the bathing-place and sat down on the rocks on a part of the shore where trippers never came. She looked over the sea, now turning misty as the dusk rolled up, and listened to the slow, lapping sound of the little waves of the receding tide as they rose and fell through the long, yellow seaweed and the red wrack on the rocks. She saw ships with smoking funnels and little sailing-boats drifting out of the Lough and down the Irish Sea; and now and then she saw a fishing-smack come floating back to land like a weary sea-bird when the night is down.

She sat in this mood of quiet contemplation for some time, and then she took a letter from the pocket in her skirt, and read it through.

She had read it many times since she had received it on the previous morning, but its contents, though she knew them almost by heart, still seemed

as new and as thrilling as when she had first opened the letter. There was twopence to pay, the postman said as he handed the unstamped letter to her. Something had warned her that it was from her husband, and very nervously she gave the money to the postman, and then hurriedly concealed the letter in her bosom until she could open it in secrecy. She hardly dared to believe the news which it contained. During the whole of the previous day and during the whole of that morning, she had told herself that the letter was a hoax, that some one, cruel or irresponsible, was trying to make her look ridiculous. She had declared to herself that she would not be so foolish as to take the silly document seriously. Despite her incredulity, however, her natural state of calm had disappeared, and ever since the receipt of the letter she had been excited, and had barely been able to conceal her excitement.

There was no particular reason why she should have met the two o'clock train. He had not stated in his letter that he would arrive at that hour. He had not stated when he would arrive. He wrote to her from Moville, and said that he had been in America, but was tired of that place, and had decided to return to her. He would be with her soon after she received his letter. That was all. The abruptness of the note made her feel certain that it was genuine. He had always made statements of fixed intention : he had never had the habit of giving explanations of conduct. Although there was no reason why she should meet the two o'clock train, she felt that she must meet it. He might come by that train, and if he

were to do so, she would like to be on the platform to greet him. . . .

The train had not brought him, and so she had turned away from the station to this lonely place on the rocks.

"It'll mebbe be a hoax," she murmured to herself, "like the letters people does be gettin', tellin' them they're left a fortune in America, an' them not left nothin' at all!"

She put the letter back into her pocket, and then stood up.

"That's mebbe it," she said, as she clambered over the rocks towards the road.

She came back into the Shore Road and walked in the direction of her shop, but before she came near it, she changed her mind about her destination. She turned into a side street that led to her home. There were few shopkeepers in Ballyreagh who lived away from their shops, and she was one of them. The little business at the corner of Hunter's Lane, started so temerariously, had thriven beyond her hopes (she had seen two attempts at rivalry incontinently collapse) and the small space occupied by the shops had had to be enlarged by taking in the living-rooms. It had happened that the cottage to which her husband had taken her after her marriage had become vacant about the time that the need to extend her shop premises had become most urgent. It was not a large cottage, although it was large enough for her, and she could easily have afforded to rent a larger and more pretentious house, but her sentiment overruled her sense of grandeur, and so she returned to the first home of her married life.

She was a woman of middle height, very slender and very pale. She had calm, passionless eyes and a gentle look, and, although she was not a beautiful woman or even a woman of good appearance, she had physical qualities which made her attractive to men of a hard, rough type. She looked fragile, but beneath her lean appearance there lay hidden a great store of nervous force which enabled her to execute gigantic tasks. It was this quality of the implacable which enabled her to open the hardware shop and make it prosper ; and it probably was this force which caused stout seamen and hefty farmers to seek her love while healthier and handsomer women languished without suitors.

Her features were sharp and little, but they were not so angular as to be grim ; her cheekbones were high, but they did not protrude aggressively ; her lips were thin and bloodless ; but her grey-blue eyes were gentle and soft. She had fine, fair hair of which she was very proud. It was so long that when it was unbound it fell below her waist. It was beginning to lose its colour now, for she was of middle age, but it still held much of its lustre, and when the days were sunny, people would remark on the shiny look it had. Her hair and her hands were her finest features, and although her hands were broken with labour, they still had a delicate shape. She had done what she could to preserve them from the defilement of common tasks. She would rub them at night with glycerine and enclose them in an old pair of kid gloves so that they might keep soft and white. Some one had told her that lemons rubbed well into the skin

kept the hands good to look at, and after she heard of this recipe, she became a frequent customer of Arthur Magrath, the fruit-hawker . . . but the work of the shop, despite her efforts, had spoilt her hands.

CHAPTER II

As she walked up Moat Street, she saw that the gate of the churchyard was open. Two men were digging a grave. She walked through the gateway and when she came to the large vault where the ancestors of the lord of the manor lay, she sat down on a broken slab of stone. It was near this stone that her second child lay. She could not be quite certain of the grave, for it was a long time since she had last entered the churchyard, and the grass over the graves was long and thick. The poor little child ! . . .

She rested her head on her hand, and let her thoughts take possession of her. The steady bump-bump of a country cart coming down the road from Newtownards seemed like a modulator of the visions of her life that floated through her mind. She could hear the carter calling to the horse, " Get on up out of that, now ! " and hear him cracking his whip as if to assure the animal that he was not speaking playfully. She looked up, and the grave-diggers nodded to her.

" It's a brave day, mem ! " one of them said, as he spat on his hands and began to shovel earth out of the grave.

" It is that," she replied, and then turned away to regard the grave where she believed that her

child was buried. He saw that she did not wish to carry on a conversation, but would rather brood over her dead, and so he did not speak to her again, but continued to dig lumps of clay out of the earth.

All those early years of her marriage passed before the eyes of her mind like a moving picture. She saw James Martin as he was when he first came to Ballyreagh from the fishing village of Ardglass where his father owned a herring-boat until he was drowned in a great storm. James was the only member of his family to follow the occupation of his father. The others had been carried to Belfast by their mother where they had been swallowed up in the shipyards and the linen factories. James Martin's ambition was outside the narrow domain of herring-fishers. He had that quality of restlessness which sends men tramping the world. A little while in Ballyreagh served to satisfy his desire to fish. He engaged himself to the skipper of an ocean tramp that went where cargoes took it. Some of its voyages were short, and some of them were long, but all of them were full of danger, for the ship was lumpy and leaky. "Only the mercy of God kept it from the bottom of the sea!" Mrs. Martin murmured to herself when she thought of that vessel floating continually on the surface of death.

James Martin made love to Martha Mahaffy almost from the first moment he saw her. Her father was his employer until he sailed away on the *Mary*. She loved him instantly. There was a boisterousness in his manner that enthralled her, and he had a rough way with women that made

her look upon him as the manliest man she had ever known. When he wished for a woman's company, she must come to him. When he was tired of her company and wished to be rid of her, he would bid her go and divert herself. He spoke in quick, direct accents. It was sufficient for him that he needed a thing—that was a reason why he should have it.

Old John Mahaffy had flamed with anger when she told him of her love for James Martin and her intention to marry him. She had broken the Mahaffy tradition in allying herself to a man of poor means. The Mahaffys were a thrifty race. They had lived in Ballyreagh for six generations that they knew of, and probably for many more of which they had no knowledge; and they were as proud of their family as any lord in Ireland could be of his. They spoke naturally of "the Mahaffys," and assumed instinctively that the misfortunes which befell other men were not likely to befall them. The Cleggs and the Magraths and the Greers and the Mawhinneys might now and then fall into disrepute. A Clegg had been sent to jail; a Mawhinney had given birth to an illegitimate child; a Greer had become a speculative builder in Belfast, had prospered a while, and then had been adjudged a bankrupt; and a Magrath had fallen into the Roman Catholic church. Such things might happen to other families that were not so well reared as the Mahaffys, but none of them had ever happened to a Mahaffy, and it was an article of belief that none of them ever would happen to a Mahaffy. Had a member of the Mahaffy family become destitute, or a

drunkard, or been deserted, or given birth to a bastard, all the Mahaffys would have considered themselves disgraced for ever. Their tradition was that each one of them should do well for himself. The men should prosper in business, and the women should marry husbands of substance.

It was Martha Mahaffy who broke the tradition. She did badly for herself. At a time when she could have chosen between George Tanner, the son of a farmer and himself a grocer gradually acquiring wealth and standing, and William James McLelland, the hotel-keeper, she chose to marry James Martin who had no money and no business, but was a rough man roaming the seas of the world. . . . The Mahaffys admitted that her father had done well when he cast his daughter from his house, and bade her go to her man. Old John Mahaffy was a true Mahaffy : he had the unrelenting spirit of his clan. When he met her in the street, he passed by her as if she were unknown to him. He would have bidden her go to the workhouse had she come to him in hunger. He would not have considered it a disgrace that she should go to the Union ; for she was no longer a Mahaffy. She had chosen against his will, to be a Martin. It was the Mahaffy tradition that a sin against authority was unforgivable.

James Martin had not anticipated that his father-in-law would be implacably opposed to his marriage with Martha. He imagined that the old man would relent after a period of opposition ; and he was gravely disconcerted when he learned that there was not to be any relenting. His return

to his ship was imminent, but he had no plans made for the support of his wife. He acquainted her with his position. He was without means at the present. He had hoped that her father would maintain her during his first voyage after their marriage, or, at least, that he would permit her to live in his house. What proposal had she to offer? What would she do while he was away from home?

She thought for a while. No Mahaffy woman had ever found herself in such a plight as this. All the Mahaffy women had married men of substance. She cast about in her mind for a solution of her problem, but she could not see any good way out of it. She said that she could do some sewing and similar work until he returned to her. She thought that her brother Henry might permit her to stay with him and his wife for a little time . . . but in this she was mistaken. Henry was next in succession to his father as head of the family, and in his opinion a flout offered to the old man was a flout offered to him. He could not condone her offence. She had brought her trouble upon herself. She should have remembered the fifth Commandment that her days might be long on the land which the Lord her God gave her. . . .

Sitting there, in that tangled graveyard, it seemed to her to be marvellous that she could ever have reconciled herself again to her brother Henry and his wife. They had treated her bitterly. They had flung her aside as if she were dirt. . . .

It was old Mrs. Crothers in Moat Street who had given a home to her: the home in which she now

lived. The old woman, querulous and partially paralysed by rheumatism, had offered to give board and lodging to her in return for her help and company; and thus secured, she had sent James forth to his seafaring. She was grateful to Mrs. Crothers for her kindness, but now that she looked back on her life then, it seemed to her that the old woman exacted a great price for her hospitality. She never seemed to be able to overcome her astonishment at her generosity in providing Martha Martin with a home when her father would not have her inside his door. She talked at great length every day of her goodness, and invented little tasks to be performed by Martha so that she might be suitably rewarded for it. She hurt Martha by her suggestions when she learned that James was not a good correspondent. He had only written once during his first voyage, which lasted for six months: and Mrs. Crothers beguiled the time of waiting by prophesying that he had no intention of ever returning to her. She declared that an additional infamy was to befall the Mahaffys, the desertion of a Mahaffy woman by her husband.

"An' you the way you are!" she would add cruelly.

It was characteristic of sailors, she asserted, that they married women out of hand, left them with children, and then deserted them. It was fortunate that he had married her: some sailors did not do that much. . . . Martha endured the old woman's unkindness with great patience. She must not quarrel with her, she said to herself, before James returned from the sea. The small sums

she earned by needlework were insufficient to keep her. She would have died rather than live so that her family might point to her as an awful example of the misery that falls on those who are guilty of the sin of disobedience. She must so arrange her life that she should seem to have prosperity. Her arrangement with Mrs. Crothers enabled her to maintain that appearance.

She smiled to herself as her mind lingered on the terrible meekness of spirit with which she had suffered Mrs. Crothers. It was as well, perhaps, that she had had to live under that burden at the beginning, for she had sore need of a patient spirit many times afterwards. She smiled, too, when she remembered how James, on his return, had conquered the petulant old woman. He had always been very masterful with women, and it was not likely that that old huddled weak thing would do anything but quail before him. She saw the scene as plainly as if it had happened the day before. Her hand took hold of a bunch of rank grass, and pulled it out of the earth. . . . He had not warned her of his return. She was sitting before the window, hemming handkerchiefs, and old Mrs. Crothers, heavily wrapped in shawls, was nagging at her from her seat in the rocking-chair before the fire. Oh, as plainly as that grass she could see the scene again. The very words that had been said. . . .

"I'm sure," the old woman had said, "there's few women in the world would treat you as dacent as I've done. The way I took you in an' give you a home, an' all!"

She had paused for a while as if she expected

to receive a reply from Martha, but, none coming, she had proceeded with her complaint. "Ah, well," she had said, "the Lord'll mebbe reward me for my good deeds! It's little thanks you get in this world for anything, but, sure, them that lays not up treasure for themselves on earth'll get it in heaven. Every good deed you do here'll be a bright jewel in your crown! . . ." She glanced up at the clock on the mantelshelf. "What's the time?" she demanded, peering blinkily with her rheumy eyes.

"It's half-after five," Martha had replied, putting her sewing down, and coming to the fireplace. "Will I make the tay?"

The old woman's mind had perceived some personal greed in Martha's question. "Dear bless us," she exclaimed crossly, "what do you want your tay so early for? An' you only after your dinner! Some people 'ud ate you out of hearth an' home!"

"I only just thought you'd like it now! . . ."

"Ah, yes, you only just thought!" She had had a twinge of rheumatism at that moment which caused her to yell with pain. "Lord save us," she cried, "the pain I have to bear! Me that never done nothin' in my born days to deserve pain the like of this! An' then you come an' bother me with your talk about tay. It was your own self, Martha Martin, was wantin' the tay, an' not me at all that you were thinkin' of! An' me not chargin' you a penny-piece for your keep nor nothin'!"

Then Martha had returned to her seat under the window, and had taken up her sewing again;

but Mrs. Crothers was not to be placated. "Well, aren't you goin' to make the tay after all?" she had demanded. "Sure, aren't you the contrary woman! . . ."

"I thought you didn't want me to make it this minute!"

"You thought! You're always thinkin'! Go on with you, woman, an' wet the tay at once!"

It was while Martha was preparing the tea that James came to the door. Neither Mrs. Crothers nor she saw him at first. Martha was getting cups and saucers from the scullery, and Mrs. Crothers was sitting with her back to him.

"That man of yours," she was saying at the time, "ought to be right well ashamed of himself! Goin' off like that, an' leavin' you with no money or nothin', an' you expectin', an' only for the kindness of a neighbour woman you'd be landed on the street or mebbe in the poorhouse. It's my belief, Martha Martin, you'll never clap your eyes on him again!"

And then James pushed the door open, and stepped into the kitchen. It was like him to wait for the moment.

"An' you're just wrong then, Mrs. Crothers!" he said, going over to the sofa and sitting down.

CHAPTER III

She could not help laughing to herself as she sat there, pulling tufts of grass from the graves and throwing them down heedlessly by her side, for poor Mrs. Crothers had been so startled by the sudden entry of James that she had forgotten about her rheumatism, and had tried to leap out of her chair.

"Glory be to God," she exclaimed, "who's that?"

Martha had hurried back to the kitchen from the scullery.

"Oh, James!" she said when she saw her husband, and then, too overcome to speak any more, she sat down and cried.

But James was not tender to her. "Ah, what are you oh, Jamesin' about!" he said roughly, throwing a parcel on to the sofa beside her.

"Sure, there's nothin' to cry about!"

She had dried her tears with her apron when he said that. "I didn't mean to cry," she said, "only it was so sudden, an' I'm not very well! . . ."

Then old Mrs. Crothers had recovered herself. "I should think it was sudden," she said shrewishly. "Comin' in on us like that without a word of warnin' or nothin', as if the house was his own, an' scarin' people out of their seven wits! Dear

knows what you might have done to her, James Martin, scarin' her like that, an' her the way she is an' all!"

He had not noticed that she was going to have a child.

"The way she is what?" he said in a surly tone.

"The way she is what!" exclaimed Mrs. Crothers in bitter sarcasm. "What way would she be with a man like you?"

He drew a chair up to the fire, and sat down beside the old woman. "You would think you were out of your mind," he said to her, rubbing his legs as he felt the warmth of the fire on them, "the way you're goin' on!"

"Out of my mind, is it? Heth, James Martin! . . ."

He cut the old woman short, and turned to his wife.

"What ails you, Martha?" he said.

"I'm going to have a child, James!" she answered.

"Och," he said, taking off his boots, "is that all? I thought there was mebbe something the matter with you. Is there a pair of slippers in the house at all?"

She went upstairs to the room where she slept, and brought down a pair of slippers for him.

"You're makin' yourself quaren at home, James Martin!" said Mrs. Crothers.

"I am," he replied. "An' why wouldn't I? Will the tay be long, Martha?"

This had been more than Mrs. Crothers' temper could endure.

"You're forgettin' yourself altogether, James Martin!" she shouted at him, raising herself a little in her chair as she did so. "That's what you're doin'! Forgettin' yourself altogether! This isn't your house, an' well you know it! Comin' in here as if you had call to come! You hadn't got a pennypiece to buy a stick of furniture when you were married on Martha there, an' mind that now! Don't be comin' in here, lettin' on to be some one, for, sure you're not, so you're not, an' you'll just walk out of this as quick as you can! You'll get no tay in my house, I'm tellin' you!"

She sank back in her chair, exhausted by her outburst, and glared angrily at him.

"Right you are," he replied, kicking off his slippers, and putting out his hand to take his boots. "We'll not trouble you any longer with our company, mem! Get your things on, Martha!"

"I didn't say she was to go," said Mrs. Crothers.

"No, I know that," he replied, "but I did. I'm her man, amn't I? Go on, Martha! Go an' get ready, an' we'll go an' look for lodgin's. I daresay you've had a miserable time of it here, with an ould woman the like of her cryin' at you all day!" Martha hesitated for a moment, and he spoke sharply to her. "Go on, will you? We'll send for the rest of your things when we've got lodgin's!"

She went upstairs again, without responding, and he finished lacing up his boots. She could hear the old woman's voice, now empty of anger and full of anxious complaint.

"You think you're quaren clever, James Martin!" Mrs. Crothers said, vaguely troubled.

"I don't think nothin' of the sort," he replied. "You told me to go, an' I'm goin'. What more do you want?"

"You know well I didn't mean her to go!"

"An' had you the cheek to think I'd be leavin' her behind me? Woman-a-dear, you must be demented mad! You've been havin' the grand time, by all I can see, enjoyin' yourself rightly, an' her doin' all the work for you, an' lookin' after you an' all, like a servant-girl, an' you doin' nothin' but scoldin' her all the time! Heth, you'll not do that much longer I'm thinkin'!"

Martha came down the stairs, as he said this, dressed for the street. "James dear," she said, "don't be hard on her. She didn't mean nothin', an' sure she's an ould woman with no one to take care of her!"

"She can take care of herself rightly. She was able to do it afore you come here, an' she'll have to do it when you're gone. An' if she can't, she can go in the poorhouse, or get some one else to do it, some one that'll want payin' for their trouble!"

Old Mrs. Crothers had lapsed into rheumy tears when she heard him speak of the poorhouse, and was now sniffing and choking. Her broken hands were beating a timeless tune on the arms of her chair.

"She's not so well as she used to be," said Martha. "She's gettin' feebler every day! . . ."

"'Deed an' that's true. Martha!" the old woman interrupted eagerly. "I'm not near the woman I was. If you had the pains an' tormentin's

I have, James Martin, you'd not be talkin' the way you are ! "

He picked up his bundle from the sofa. " Well, sure, I can't help your pains an' tormentin's, can I ? " he said. " Come on, Martha, afore it gets dark. Sure, we're keepin' the woman from her tay ! "

He walked towards the door and pulled it open. Martha stood still in the middle of the kitchen, looking at him as if looking would cause him to relent. Her anxiety and her impending motherhood had weakened her, and she was very fragile-looking as she stood there in the glow of the sunset. But James did not notice that she was tired.

" Come on," he said in his hard, rough voice, turning to go out.

Mrs. Crothers gave a great, helpless cry, and began to rock herself feebly in her chair.

" Don't be goin' an' leavin' me," she called to Martha. " Sure, I didn't mean the half I said ! "

James came back into the kitchen. He threw his bundle down again on the sofa, and reseating himself before the fire, began to unlace his boots.

" There's your slippers," said Martha, putting them ready for him.

" Right you are," he exclaimed. " Get the tay ready, will you ? I'm dyin' o' hunger ! . . ."

After that, she was like clay in his hands. The old woman, who lived on a pension, had become so decrepit that had Martha left her, she must have done as James had said, either go into the poor-house or pay some one to take care of her. Her old querulous tone was maintained when she and Martha were alone, and she would threaten to

teach James a lesson one day when she had her health back; but her threats had no sting in them. Before James returned home, Mrs. Crothers had believed that she could turn Martha out of doors at any moment and that were she to act in that manner she would enormously disconcert Martha; but now she had learned that she could only disconcert herself by such a deed. In James's presence she was like a frightened child. She did not speak to him unless he spoke to her. She would sit huddled up in her chair before the fire, with her shawls tightly folded about her, and her grey, withering hair covered by a white night-cap. Martha would place a clove between her toothless gums, and she would roll it about between them until it became too soft to grip; and then she would whimper for another one. She always held a handkerchief in her knuckly hands, and she would sit thus for a long time, chewing the clove and twisting the handkerchief about in her fingers until it became crumpled and dirty. She seldom spoke. Sometimes her lips would move, but no words issued from them, and then her eyes would water and become dry again.

There was something terrible in the spectacle of that hulk of a woman, sitting in front of the fire, gazing with rheumy eyes at nothing. Her cheeks had fallen in, and her teeth had all gone. Her skin was yellow and crinkled with lines that made great clefts on her brow and gathered in a dreadful cluster about her eyes and mouth. When she ate her food, her jaws, long and lean, worked with horrible monotony. Her mind had received a blow from which it could not recover: she was

rapidly lapsing into senility: she was almost an empty shell. Death had had no difficulty with her. Martha remembered that. The old woman had fallen out of life very easily. She had been dressed and happed in her shawls, and half-carried to her chair. The handkerchief had been placed in her fingers, and a clove between her gums. The broken, gnarled fingers began to work the moment they felt the handkerchief, and the pale gums worried the clove remorselessly. She had been still for a while, and Martha had imagined that she was asleep. Suddenly she began to cry.

"What ails you?" said Martha, going towards her.

The old woman made a gurgling sound in her throat. Her eyes opened very wide, and she seemed to be afraid. "It's the quare thing! . . ." she began to say, and then lay back in her chair.

"What did you say?" Martha asked, putting the clove which had fallen in her lap back into her mouth.

The old woman did not respond. She sat there quite quietly, gazing vacantly and fixedly before her. The hands ceased to be agitated, the clove fell again from her lips and rolled off her lap on to the floor; her rheumy eyes gazed more vacantly and fixedly still. . . .

"Is she dead yet?" said James, when Martha summoned him from the corner of the street.

They took possession of the cottage and its contents. Mrs. Crothers had no relatives nearer at hand than America, and her effects were of so little value that question was not raised when James made them his own. She had left a few

sovereigns in her cash-box, but the cost of burying her took all of them, he said.

"We've got a home, anyway," he said to Martha, "an' we're not beholdin' to no one, your da or anybody!"

Death was busy then. It was soon after Mrs. Crothers' burial that old John Mahaffy fell ill. Esther, who was Martha's younger sister, came running to her, weeping and demanding help.

"Did my da send you?" said Martha to the weeping girl.

"No, he did not," she replied.

"Ah, sure, that doesn't matter," James exclaimed. "You can't be keepin' up wrangles when a man's on his death-bed, can you? An' mebbe he wasn't able to say nothin'!"

Martha put her shawl about her shoulders, and prepared to go home with her sister. "I'm not wantin' to be keepin' up wrangles," she said. "I'm only afeard he'll not let me next or near him!"

She sent Esther to fetch the doctor, and told her to summon her brother Henry. "You should 'a' brought him afore!" she said.

But Esther had purposely refrained from sending for Henry and his wife. "I can't bear Jane Mahaffy," she said.

"Go on, now, girl!" said Martha, "an' fetch them all, an' I'll go up to the house!"

Esther hurried out of the cottage, and James went to the door to look after her as she ran up the street.

"That sister of yours has got to be a nice-lookin' girl," he said, as Martha went past him into the street.

"She's not so bad," she answered as she hurried off.

Her brother and his wife were already in her father's house when she arrived. She greeted them civilly.

"Is that you, Henry?" she said. "How're you, Jane?"

Henry looked sourly at her. "Aye, it is," he replied. "An' what brings you here, I'd like to know?"

"The same that brings you, I suppose!" she answered grimly.

Jane Mahaffy had entered the sick-room, but she came out again very soon, ominous and gloomy. "It's near his death he is!" she said.

Martha threw her shawl aside, and made as if she would enter the dying man's room, but Jane Mahaffy stood in her way.

"He'll not have you anear him, he says!" she said.

Martha pushed her aside. "For shame, Jane Mahaffy," she exclaimed, "to be sayin' the like of that about a man to his daughter. Get out of my way, will you!"

Her brother called to her in his solemn, pompous tones. "Conduct yourself decently," he said, "an' not be goin' on like that, an' the angel of death at hand!"

"He's my da as well as yours," Martha retorted passionately, "an' he's nothin' to her. It's the like of you that put bitterness in him against me, but you'll not stop me now from seein' him, I tell you certain sure!"

She opened the door and went into the room,

stepping lightly as is the way with people in the presence of the dying.

"Is that you, Jane?" the sick man said feebly.

"No, da," she replied. "It's me!"

He raised himself up in the bed with sudden fury, and waved his hand at her, but whatever it was he wished to say to her, would not come; the words would not form on his lips; and he fell back exhausted on to his pillow. She went over to him, and put her arm under him and lifted him up, but he rolled himself out of her grasp and sank down heavily in the bed. Her brother and his wife had followed her into the bedroom, and Jane Mahaffy now thrust herself between her and the dying man.

"Do you want to kill the ould fellow," she said, "troublin' him like that!" She bent over him, and spoke to him. "It's me," she said. "It's Jane!"

He turned to her, and his lips moved.

"I can't hear what you say!" she said.

"Tell . . . Tell. . . ."

"Tell what?"

He made a great effort to be coherent. "Tell . . . tell . . . her. . . ."

"Do you mean Martha?" Jane asked, and he nodded his head.

Martha went forward to the bedside. "It's me he wants," she said. "I told you it was!"

The old man shook his head at her. His eyes caught Jane's, and he tried to speak again. "Tell . . . tell . . . her . . . go . . . go 'way!" he gasped out.

Jane laid him back on the pillow. "You heard

what he said, didn't you?" she said to Martha.

"Mebbe, you'll go now," James exclaimed.

Martha stood irresolutely for a few moments, and then went to the head of the bed again. "Do you want me to go away from you, da?" she said to her father.

He nodded his head. "Go . . . go . . . 'way . . . you!" he said.

She looked down on him for a second or two, and then turned and went out of the room. She did not cry nor did she bemoan her father's hardness. She fixed her shawl about her head, and went home.

"He's the hard ould lad," said James, when she told him of what had happened.

A week later her father had died. Her share of the inheritance was willed to Henry and Esther in equal parts, and the cottage was left to Henry and his wife. Esther refused to live in it with them. Her brother insisted that her place was with him, the head of the family, but she told him that she detested his wife, and would live with Martha instead. There had been an angry scene between them in which he accused her of disloyalty to her dead father.

"You know well," he said, "my da never forgive her, an' he'd never have let you go anear her if he knowed. You'd 'a' got nothin' in his will if he'd thought you were goin' to live with her after him dead!"

"I'll do what I like," said Esther, "an' not what you like!"

So it was that Esther came to live with Martha

in Mrs. Crothers' cottage. "You'll be in need of some one to keep you company," she said, "when James is away to sea, an' you the way you are!"

James patted her on the shoulder and kissed her when he heard of her proposal. "You're the right wee girl," he said. "You are in sang! I was wonderin' to myself what I'd be doin' about Martha, an' me goin' away again next week, an' the Lord only knows when I'll be back!"

That was the first definite information Martha had received of his pending departure. She had known, of course, that he must soon go away again, but in a vague fashion she had hoped that he would be with her when the baby was born.

"It'll be lonely without you," she said.

"Ah, sure, it's always lonely wherever you are!"

"You could mebbe stay a wee while 'til the child is born!"

"No," he answered, "I couldn't stop at all. What 'ud be the good of me stoppin' any way? I'm sick, sore an' tired of doin' nothin' all day, an' I want to be on the sea again!"

In this way was it arranged. Esther came to live with Martha, and on the appointed day James sailed to Charlestown in America. It was while he was away that her baby was born: a boy whom she named after his father.

CHAPTER IV

It seemed to her, as she sat there, brooding over the past, that it was only last night that she had lain in bed afraid of the pain to come. She was a proud woman, then as now, and she had not asked for help or comfort from her relatives. Esther was too young to understand or assist. She had had to bear her fear in silence.

There had been times when she could feel the child stirring in her womb so that its movements hurt her. She could have cried aloud, but she had not wished anyone to know that she was suffering. If she had only had James by her side, and could have clung to him in the night when the pain came ; if only she could have told him of it, and had been comforted by him, it would, she imagined, have been easier to bear. There was no one to give consolation to her. "It would make Esther afeard," she had said to herself, when she restrained her desire to tell the girl of what was happening to her.

Then had come the great pain of all, when it seemed as if her body were bursting, and every particle of her flesh was being screwed up tightly. Some one had tied a towel to the top of her bed so that she could hold it when the time came, and she had torn at it desperately, for she did not wish

to scream; but the pain beat her, and a great cry broke from her lips. It seemed to her that the world was tumbling to pieces, that she could not live, that after such agony death must come like precious balsam. . . . She remembered the pale, anxious face of the doctor, and that even in her pain she had wondered to herself why it was that his eyes were of different colours: one was brown, and one was grey. And when she felt that the supreme moment had come, and death had but to turn the corner, and she would be ready to go with him, her memory slipped away from her. . . . There was a tiny, wailing sound in the room, she remembered, when she recovered consciousness.

"Is that it?" she said to the nurse, and then, when she had been answered, she whispered, "What is it?" and they told her that she was the mother of a son.

"A most difficult birth," the doctor had said afterwards, "but you came through it splendidly!"

"The Mahaffys were always a tough lot," she answered jokingly.

In the course of time, she had two more children, both girls. She called one of them Esther, after her sister, and the other was called Agnes, after her husband's mother. The little Esther had died when she was two years old, and here in this grave she lay, where all the dead Mahaffys lay, mingling her dust with that of the unrelenting old man who was her grandfather. James Martin was at home when the child suddenly sickened and then as suddenly died. Mrs. Martin could not bear to stay any longer in the graveyard when she thought of her baby's death. She still felt the

pain of that poor burial, and when she remembered how kind James had been to her then, she cried. He had loved the little Esther so tenderly, and mourned for her bitterly. He had been sitting by her bed when she died, and when the last convulsive moan came from the tiny, tortured body, and she lay dead, he turned away and wandered into the garden at the back of the cottage. In the evening they found him there, stretched on the ground, close to the fuchsia bush. He had a hard, hungry look in his eyes. Her sister Esther had said afterwards that he had the appearance of a man who had been shedding dry tears. Then he went to sea again, and when he returned he did not speak of the baby, nor did he ever go to the churchyard to look at her grave.

She had to come away from the burial-place. For years, now—so long that it seemed a lifetime—she had been living with all her emotions tightly screwed; but the letter she had received the day before had loosened them; and all the memories that had become dull were bright again, and the tears that she had thought would never flow another time were brimming in her eyes. As she answered the grave-diggers' "Good-day to you, mem!" and came out of the churchyard, she recollected something that her brother Henry had said to her when Esther was buried. His heart had softened towards her when the affliction fell upon her, and he followed the little coffin to its burial. "Death is the strange thing," he said. "The young taken, an' the ould left! It's quare to think of my da lyin' there, with your child on the top of him, an' him hadn't a word to say to you, an' him dyin'.

That's quare!" Indeed it was queer! That stern, unbending old man and the little wayward child were mingled dust, and they and generations older than they, were neither old nor young, passionate nor passionless, seared nor unmarked; but just one common piece of brown earth, incapable of hurt or wrong. "An' clean, too!" she murmured. "Clean like the sea!" That was queer, surely: to be an unforgiving old man one time, or a child learning to talk, and then to be a handful of mould that may be taken in hand and scattered to the wind as one scatters sand. . . .

It was after the death of the baby Esther that James had grown strange in his manner towards her. That memory came into her mind as she stood at the pump a little way from the gate of the churchyard, wondering what she should do now. She could not go back to the shop, and she did not yet desire to go home. Esther would be there! . . . She walked up the street a little on the road towards Newtownards until she came to the narrow lane that led to the mound on which the Moat stood: a round tower in which, so legend ran, smugglers once kept their treasure, though the records make a beacon-tower of it. She climbed the path, and sat down on a wooden seat at the foot of the Moat. Maybe, on this very seat James and Esther. . . .

He had always been a restless man, but after the death of the baby, there were added to his restlessness anger and sullen temper and swift changes of mood. Her sister Esther had always been a girl with fine looks, but now that she was approaching womanhood she had beauty and

favour. She was tall and slender, and her clothes fitted closely to her form, showing the outlines of her shapely limbs. She had dark hair that coiled about her head in clinging curls, and she had fine long lashes that made dusky pools of her eyes. Her lips were full and red, and she had little white, sharp teeth. Her breasts were like little round towers. She was beautiful and warm and loving. . . . Martha came on her and James suddenly one day. He damned her for her suspicious mind and asked whether he could not kiss his sister-in-law without people saying things and thinking things. If she wanted to know the truth, Esther had been chaffing him, and he had just paid her out! What the hell was she gaping at! . . . Esther came weeping to her later and said that she was sorry. She had not meant to do any harm. She would go away from Ballyreagh if Martha wished her to do so, even to America. She would never give cause for complaint again. She swore it of her own accord on the Bible. It had all been a joke. She could not think why she had allowed James to kiss her—for that was all that took place between them. She was sorry she had ever been born. Indeed, indeed, she assured her sister, there had not been any wrong thing between them, except the kiss. She turned from her sister, and said quietly, "That will do, Esther!" and said no more. She never spoke about it again, although she suspected that her husband and Esther continued to love and kiss and sin.

Henry Mahaffy had come to her and complained that the conduct of Esther and James was scandalous. It was his duty as head of the family

he said, to interfere, and he spoke of carrying Esther before the minister. . . . She had told him that he was wrong to suspect his sister of sin with James. She could not imagine how anyone could invent such stories about a young, motherless girl. It was a pack of lies. . . . " Didn't I see them myself," he retorted angrily, " the pair of them kissin' in the dark ! I saw them with my own eyes, lyin' that close together, you couldn't see a shadow between them. Kissin' an' huggin' they were ! . . ."

" Why didn't you go an' speak to them, then ? " she had replied, and he had answered, " Don't you know rightly he's a headstrong man ! "

" You never saw them at all. You couldn't 'a' seen them, for they weren't there ! You were dreamin', Henry, bad dreams, for James never stirred out of the door that night ! "

She had told the lie bravely and easily, and, thus repulsed, her brother had gone away doubting the value of his sight. The story had grown ; and for that Jane Mahaffy was to blame ; but she ignored the gabble and the back-biting. She had denied that there was anything between her husband and her sister, and she did not propose to continue discussing the affair with people whose minds were set on gossip. It was not Henry's fault that he could not keep off the minister's doorstep. He had a great deal to endure, poor man ! His wife was a bitter woman, made sour by her childlessness. . . She and Henry had fallen out again. They passed by in the street without speaking.

But if she told her neighbours that the story was a lie, she knew in her heart that it was true ; and sometimes in the night a great rage would

swell up in her, and she could hardly keep herself still in the bed. Sometimes she came near to striking her sister, sometimes she longed to expose her to ignominy, but the pride that was the boast of her family held her hand down and kept her tongue quiet. She said that Esther should stay on in the house with her although the girl pleaded to be allowed to go away.

"No, you'll stop here! They'll think it's true, if you go away!"

"But it is true! . . ."

"I know it is . . . but we needn't tell everybody!"

There was some cruelty in her desire to keep Esther by her. She had spoken to her husband of her intention to let her stay on in the house, and he had answered indifferently, "You can do what you like with her. I don't want her no more! She's no good! Cryin' an' girnin' all the time! You'll not bother me any more, the pair of you!"

When she heard him speak in that manner, she was glad of her decision to keep Esther with her. She had a wish to witness the girl's pain when she learned that to James she was no more than any other woman, a creature to gratify his lust. She had a longing to look in on Esther's desolation, to see her just once with her empty heart. Soon after that he sailed away, and when he had been gone a month, she knew that she was to be a mother again. She had decided to open the shop before she knew of her pregnancy, for he had never suppled her with sufficient money to keep the house comfortably. It had been his custom to give to her a sum which he considered adequate

to maintain her and her children until his return; but as his voyages varied in duration, it sometimes happened that the money was expended before he had returned. That, however, was none of his affair. She had to make up the deficit as best she could. . . . It may be said of him that he was a just man. Had the money been more than sufficient for her needs during his absence from home, he would not have demanded a refund of the balance, nor would he have reduced the next allowance proportionately. It was simply due to the wilfulness of things that there never was a balance, just as it was part of the natural ill-luck which pursued her then, that the fund was frequently depleted before he returned to replenish the purse. He made no inquiries about the expenditure, nor did he ask whether the sum he left behind him was sufficient to maintain her, nor did she tell him of her difficulties. When his first voyage had ended later than he had anticipated and the money had had to be supplemented by laundry work and such other ways of earning as were open to her, she had not mentioned the matter to him because she feared that she might have been extravagant. She could not justly accuse herself of being a spendthrift when she reviewed her expenditure; but she believed that her husband was a man of experience and strict principles, and she could only conclude that inexperience had led her into unaccountable extravagance; so she did not speak to James of the inadequacy of her allowance.

The conclusion of his second voyage coincided in time with the depletion of her fund, and this

fact seemed to her to be positive proof of the sagacity and farsight of her husband. The third voyage resembled the first : the fund was depleted before his return. He still did not make any inquiry, and suddenly knowledge came to her. He expected her to keep herself and the children no matter how long he might be away from home. . . . She had thought as deeply as she could over the matter in the long, lonely nights when she could not sleep, and plans gradually formed in her mind. She would open a shop. Perhaps she could make it so profitable that James would not need to go to sea again. . . . She spoke to him of her idea a little while before he set off on that last voyage. She had told him of her intention to keep Esther with her, and had learned with joy that he had no love left for the girl. Then she spoke of her plan.

" Esther'll be a help to me," she said, when she had finished her recital.

" Well, it's nothin' to me," he replied. " You can start what you like. There's your money for you, an' if you lose it on a shop, it'll be your own look-out. You can't blame me ! Forby, I'll not bother you no more ! . . ."

She had heard him speak a similar sentence earlier in the evening, but she had not paid attention to it.

" What do you mean, James ? " she said.

" It's plain enough, what I say, isn't it ? " he had snarled at her. " You understand English, don't you ? "

" Ah, but ! . . ."

" I'm not coming back to you ! That's what I

mean! I'm sick, sore an' tired of you all, you an' your brother Henry an' his bitch of a wife! I'm tired of this country! . . ."

She remembered the scowl on his face as he said that. She had stood quite still, listening to him, and looking at him as if she were trying to see into his mind. She could not believe that she had heard him say that he was going to desert her. She knew that men sometimes left their wives, but. . . .

" You're not comin' back to me? " she had said incredibly, and he had mocked the strained voice in which she had spoken as he answered, " No, I'm not comin' back! I've done with you, I tell you, an' I've done with Esther, too. Her an' her cryin'! . . ."

Then she realized that what he said was true. The terrible infamy of desertion was to be hers. She had seen men's names posted on the door of the poorhouse, with a reward offered for their apprehension . . . and she was to be a woman like those poor women. She had strolled over to the window without knowing what she was doing, and she could just see the waves rolling up over the rocks, breaking into galloping white horses, and the sea-gulls dipping and rising and dipping again with long, fluttering wings, or floating through the air without moving their wings until they had made a wide circle. A long way out, where the sea and the dusky clouds were joined together, she could see the faint outline of a great steamer. It seemed hardly to move, though the faint trail of white foam behind it grew longer and longer. . . .

" Mebbe, you'll change your mind," she had said to him, without turning away from the window, and " Mebbe, I won't ! " he had replied. She did not speak again for a little while. The night closed in, and the great steamer with its trail of foam was lost in the darkness. She could no longer see the waves, leaping and tumbling and splashing on the rocks, but she could hear the noise they made in their progress. Her eyes felt sore with watching ! . . . Mrs. Crothers had watched like that. . . . She turned wearily towards the fire, and began to poke it.

" Will I make your tay ? " she asked in a toneless voice.

" Aye, if you please ! " he answered.

She set the kettle on the coals, and then prepared the table for the meal.

" You must do what you think best," she said, when she had laid the white cloth.

" Aye," he replied, " that's what we all have to do ! "

Esther came in and they sat down to the meal, but none of them spoke, and when it was over James took the *Belfast Evening Telegraph* and read it for an hour, and then he went out to McConkey's Hotel. He ignored Esther, and the girl gazed at him as he went out with terrible, appealing eyes. When he had gone, she sat mutely waiting for Martha to speak, but her sister busied herself with removing the remnants of the meal.

" Will I help you, Martha ? " she said timorously.

" No, thank you, Esther ! " Martha replied.

She put the table back into its place, and then she went to the fire and tidied up the hearth.

"You must be tired, Esther," she said, when she had finished. "You'd better go up to your bed an' have your rest!"

Esther sat still for a few moments. It seemed to Martha that she was eager to say something, but no words came. She went upstairs to her room.

"Good-night to you, Martha!" she said, and Martha answered, "Good-night, Esther!"

Neither she nor Henry spoke again of his intention to leave her. He came home from McConkey's Hotel at closing-time. He was not drunk, but he had taken drink. . . . He kicked off his boots, and walked in his stockings to the bedroom.

"Where's the candle?" he said.

"Here it is," she replied, handing it to him.

He took it from her without speaking, and left her to bolt the doors. When she entered the bedroom he was already in bed, and asleep.

In the morning he went away. Esther, red-eyed and ashamed, hid herself in the room which she shared with Jamesey. She did not know that her lover was already tired of her, or that he had declared his intention not to return to Ballyreagh. She had lain sobbing on her bed all night, saying to herself one moment that she would never have anything more to do with James, and wondering at the next moment how long it would be before he returned to her. She had confessed to Martha long afterwards that when she heard the street-door open and shut, she had risen hurriedly from her bed and gone to the window to watch James walking down the street. Her mind had filled

with wonder when she saw that he was alone. "She's not with him!" she had said to herself. Then she stood at the window, looking after him until he came to the corner, and she held her hand ready to wave to him. But he had not turned his head to look back. He went round the corner as stiffly as he had walked down the street, without a glance of farewell to those whom he was leaving. She had stood gaping at the corner as if she hoped that it would disappear so that she might see him again, and the dark pools of her eyes filled with tears.

"He's away," she murmured, "an' he never looked back!"

She wiped her eyes, and then looked at herself in the mirror that stood on the table under the window.

"I'm the quare sight!" she said to herself, as she poured some cold water into the basin and bathed her eyes.

"You didn't go with him?" she said to Martha when at last she went downstairs to the kitchen.

"No," Martha replied, "he said he'd rather be alone! . . ."

Esther sat on the long seat, and gazed into the garden.

"Did he say anything about me?" she asked, looking through the window.

"No," said Martha, "he didn't. Will you have your breakfast now?"

And while Esther was sitting upstairs in the bedroom crying her eyes out, he and she had sat down to their last meal together. His face was unshaven, and his eyes were red-rimmed, but not

with weeping, and his head was sore. He could not eat the bacon she offered him.

"I don't want it," he said. "Gimme a drink of tay! That's all I want!"

She helped him to tie his bundles securely, and when he was ready, she held his coat for him while he put it on.

"Will I come to the station with you?" she said.

"You needn't trouble yourself," he answered.

"It's no trouble! . . ."

"I'd rather be by my lone!"

"Very well, James!"

He took his cap off the peg behind the door, and stood before a handglass while he adjusted it on his head. Then he took up his bundles and walked towards the door.

"Would you like to see Jamesey?" she asked.

"I haven't the time," he said.

"Good-bye James!"

He nodded his head, but did not turn to look at her.

"So long!" he said as he went out.

CHAPTER V

A BAND was playing somewhere near at hand, and the lilting jingles made a gay noise. She got up from her seat and walked around the tower until she came to another seat from which she could look down on the town. A narrow lane, terminating at the foot of the hill on which the Moat stood, ran at right angles to the Shore road. Her shop was a short distance from the corner of this lane. . . For a little while she ceased to think about her affairs. She allowed her eyes to glance idly about her. The Shore Road was crowded by trippers, and the sound of laughter and jolly talk floated up to her in the high air. She could see parties of girls and young men coming from the direction of the station, and she smiled to herself when she saw their pleasure. A girl with bright eyes would look and laugh at a capering youth, and a man, in gay garments, would suddenly catch a woman by the waist and hug her though she protested shrilly. . . . "The young things are that happy," Mrs. Martin murmured to herself. So the crowd passed up and passed down : old men and old women, walking gently and looking about them with quiet eyes or standing with folded hands at the sea-wall to watch the waves splashing against the rocks ; young men and young women making jokes together and

calling out gladly because of the warm sunshine and the beauty of the world; boys and girls, shy lovers newly conscious of their love, taunting each other with their sudden maturity; children galloping here and there, uttering shouts of surprise at the leaping sea and the never-ending marvel of waves and sand and rocks and seaweed and the heaving movements of ships. Mrs. Martin loved sunshine and gay girls and laughing men and the sparkle of the sea and the glow of bright colours on ships and hills and land and water. A long way out at sea, a heat mist made a veil across the sky and ocean, but near at hand the sunlight ran in little silver ripples across the jumping waves like a girl who runs from her lover and laughs as she runs. There were boats and yachts and bigger vessels in the harbour or just beyond the breakwater, and the white sails and the brown sails, lit by sunshine, mingled with the red gunwales and the green gunwales and the black bodies of the boats, and made one lovely flame of colour.

"It's happy they all are," she said to herself, "and it's a brave day for them, too. It's a happy woman I am this hour! . . ."

Her mind went back to her history, and she thought of the way in which she had begun her business. She was startled when she thought of the light manner in which she had opened the shop. She had calmly taken on responsibilities which might have destroyed her . . . she realized that now . . . but when she had taken them on herself they had seemed easy enough to bear. Her husband had deserted her, and she had very little money. It was true that no one knew of her desertion, and

it was true that Esther still had the money left to her by her father, and it might have been that these factors operated for her good with the landlord and the tradesmen in Belfast. She had not asked Esther to lend any sum to her because to have done so would have made it necessary to give explanations ; and she had felt that she could not tell Esther, of all women, the story of her husband's perfidy. There were other reasons why she should not ask Esther to give or lend money to her. The Mahaffys had a strong dislike of receiving benefits from those with whom they had quarrelled. Esther's fortune had been bequeathed to her by her father, who had maintained his anger against Martha on his death-bed. She felt that it would have been mean to take his money (for she still thought of it as his money although he was dead and it legally belonged to Esther) when he was away from life, knowing that he would have withheld it from her had he been alive.

Her lack of money, however, had not been her only trouble. She had a son to rear, and in a while she was to be the mother of another child. . . . Whatever she decided to do must, she had known, be decided upon quickly. All must be settled before the progress of her pregnancy disabled her from the conduct of affairs. . . . She had spent a week in thinking and planning. Down there in that street, now thickly peopled with men and women in merry mood, she had paced backwards and forwards, looking at the shops that were there, and speculating on the kind of shop she should open. Her first thought had been of a shop for the sale of confectionery. That seemed the most obvious

form of enterprise for her to undertake, but she swiftly abandoned the idea when she remembered how many shops of that kind there were already in the town and how little of permanence and necessity there is in the demand for sweets. "A ha'porth of lumps or a penn'orth of yellow man 'ud mebbe be all you'd sell in a day!" she had said to herself. Her mind had revolted from the thought of opening a public-house, but even if it had not done so, a public-house was impossible for her. There were enough of them already, and such traffic needed the care of a man. Her man! . . . She had thought of groceries, of draperies, of newspapers, of baby-linen and of vegetables. Her mind lingered for a long time over the idea of baby-linen. . . . Then she had suddenly thought of hardware. She had been sitting at the door of her cottage on a Saturday evening. The boy was sprawling at her feet, reaching out his fat little hands to grasp the wallflowers and mignonette and London pride, and as she had stooped to lift him out of harm's way and bid him not to be a wee tory, she thought to herself that her shop must be one that was not already to be found in Ballyreagh.

"It'll have to be something that isn't here now," she said to herself, "an' the worst of that is, the people'll mebbe not want it if I start it!"

She had asked herself what common necessity of life there was which was difficult to obtain in Ballyreagh.

"Crocks, of course!" she exclaimed so sharply that Jamesey had been startled and had tumbled over on his side, bumping his brow on a pebble.

He had set up a howl instantly, and she had gathered him up in her arms to comfort him.

"Crockery," she said to him, "that's what it'll be, Jamesey! Crockery and delph and hardware! There, there, son-dear, an' don't be cryin'! Sure, don't you know rightly we can't get hardly any in this place, an' have til be waitin' til the man comes round with the handcart from Bangor, mebbe, or Newtownards, an' then he'll mebbe not have what you want!"

"Wow-wow-wow!" Jamesey had howled, indifferent to anything but the bump on his forehead.

Thereafter she had worked swiftly; and the shop had been prosperous. Her brother Henry had prophesied that the venture must end in disaster since she had neglected to consult with him, and he had hinted that her bankruptcy would certainly be a sign of God's displeasure at her impious act in permitting Esther to remain with her after the way in which she had misbehaved herself. "It's not right," he had said, "to be makin' little o' God that way!" but she had bidden him hold his tongue or quit the house. Other wise persons had urged her to abandon her wild notion of engaging in the sale of crockery. They had pointed out that her experience of trade was very slight, in fact, that she had not had any experience of the practical management of a shop at all; and they besought her to turn her mind towards other forms of industry more suitable to women: charring, laundry work and the like. They had suggested that she should let lodgings. "You might do well for yourself in the summer when the visitors come to the shore!" they said.

She had persisted in her intention to deal in hardware. No one had known how slender were her means or that her husband had gone for good. Her cares and anxieties were known only to herself. She sat up proudly when she remembered that although she had been with child when she started the shop, there had not been any faintings or complaints or alms-seeking or badgering of friends and relatives. No one had known when she hired the shop from Mr. Porter and paid three months' rent in advance for it, that she had no means by her of paying for a second quarter's rent, nor that when she stocked the shop with delph and chinaware she could not possibly have paid for it instantly had an immediate settlement of her account been demanded. She had had just enough money left, after she had paid the quarter's rent in advance, to provide her family with food for a few weeks. If the shop were to fail. . . . Her chief asset was her good name. The Mahaffys were a respected family. Mr. Porter had not pressed her to pay a quarter's rent in advance: a month's rent, he had said, would be sufficient; but she had insisted on paying the larger sum. It was the way of the Mahaffys, she had said to him, to be on the safe side; and then he had laughed at her and had said that the Mahaffys were as safe as anyone or anything could be; and she had laughed too, and said she had a good mind to test his sincerity. "Go on, an' try me!" he replied, still laughing, and she had said, "Well, then, I will. You can go bail for me to Luke and Macnamara, the wholesale hardware people in Belfast! . . ." "Och, sure, that's nothin' at

all to test me," he answered. "I'll do it gladly!"

That was the way in which she had started the shop. It might have failed. She might have been disgraced by bankruptcy. . . . She shuddered a little as she thought of the horror of not paying debts in full. But she had succeeded. There had been times when her heart trembled. Those were times when she was more than ordinarily conscious of the coming child. It seemed to her then that James had not only flown from her side, but had struck her heavily in his flight. But she had succeeded. She had thrust all her misgivings from her mind, and had determined to make the shop prosper. She took Esther up the road that leads to Millisle and told her of her plans. She did not tell her of the desertion, but she told her of all the rest.

"I need your help quaren bad, Essie!" she said, "an' you'll give it til me, won't you?"

"I will indeed!" Esther answered fervently.

"It's quaren good of you," she replied thankfully.

They opened the shop and waited for the customers to come. . . . They came. Then the baby was born, and it was called Agnes. They had lived behind the shop for several years until the business became too big, and then they had moved to the cottage where old Mrs. Crothers had died and from which James had gone on that last journey from her side. . . .

She stood up and gazed down at a group of trippers who were ascending the winding-path leading to the summit of the hill on which the Moat

stood. A chill ran through her, and she drew her cape closely about her.

"The evenin's drawin' in," she said to herself, as she descended the hill and came again into Moat Street. She walked towards her cottage. He was returning to her! After all these years he was coming home again! Not once, since he had left her, until the previous day had she heard from him. Jamesey had asked after his father, and so had Esther and the others, but she had answered that she knew no more of his whereabouts than they did. There had been a story that he had been captured by savages and was kept a prisoner in the heart of Africa; and her brother Henry had believed it. He had written to the Belfast newspapers about his brother-in-law, and there had been a paragraph in the *Northern Whig* which impressed Henry and his friends, but infuriated Martha. She had gone to Henry and begged of him to mind his own business, but he had been in a mood to be magnanimous. She had not consulted him about the shop. She had flouted his opinion with regard to Esther. In many other matters he had been treated disrespectfully; but he was willing to overlook the past. He had admitted that her business had thriven, and she had foreborne to mention that his carrying was declining since the development of the railway. She had done well for herself in many ways, and had brought up her children in a Godfearing fashion. He would give all credit to her, *but* there were times when a woman needed the help of a man, and since she had not got the help of her own man she should have his, freely and without price.

"All I want you to do," she had said to him, "is to leave me alone, an' not be interferin' with your nonsense about heathen savages. I've done well without your help, an' mebbe I'll continue to do as well without it!"

And was that the way she rewarded him for the interest he took in her? Was that the thanks he got for all he did for her? Hadn't he put an advertisement in the "Missing Friends" column of the Belfast weekly papers, and written a letter to the Queen herself? And hadn't he got an answer from her that was dictated out of her own mouth to her secretary that he could show to her if she would trouble herself to step up the road to his house? Hadn't the secretary signed himself "Your Obedient Servant" and regretted that the matter was not one in which her Majesty could interfere? Didn't that show the kind of respect in which he was held by the quality even if his own sister made little of him? . . .

One day a drunken sailor had staggered into the shop. . . . When she heard what he had to say, she hurriedly seized him and thrust him into the street where he lay and babbled weakly of ingratitude and of some one who had behaved infamously. It had been difficult for the policeman to understand what the drunken sailor was saying, but he evidently referred to some one who was living in Charlestown with his wife. Constable McKeown arrested him for being drunk and incapable, and the magistrates sent him to jail for a month. . . . It was after that that Martha told the story of the way in which her man was drowned at sea. It was a rumour she had heard, she said.

James had left his boat at Charlestown and signed on for a voyage in another, and the story was that he was washed over the boat's side in a storm and drowned.

"Mebbe," Esther had said, "it's not true. Sometimes they come back again, an' them wasn't drowned at all!"

"You needn't be thinkin' the like of that, Essie, for he's drowned certain!"

And now he was returning to her! The letter said that he would soon be with her. It said no more than that. . . . She felt that she must tell some one. She had kept the news to herself too long, and brooding on the past had disturbed her nerves. She hurried to her door, and pushed it open. Perhaps he had come home already. He might even now be in the cottage with Esther, for Esther seldom served in the shop now. She took care of the cottage. She seemed to be happier there than in the shop, and it was better that she should be so for her manner was no longer gracious, and some of the customers had made complaints. . . . If he were in the house with Esther. . . .

But Esther was alone.

"What ails you, Martha?" she said, gazing at her sister's agitated face.

"He hasn't come yet? . . ."

"Who hasn't come yet?"

"James?"

"Sure, it's not his time yet. He goes til the futball matches in Belfast on a Saturday! . . ."

"I don't mean him—I mean his da! . . ."

"You mean! . . ." Esther looked at her sister in alarm. "What's happened you, Martha?"

she said, going to her and catching hold of her arm. "Are you sick or what?"

Mrs. Martin sat down by the fire, and waited until she had recovered from her swift alarm.

"It's all right, Esther!" she said. "I'm not demented mad. You needn't look so scared. He's comin' home the day!"

Esther stood still before her, looking at her as if she could not comprehend what she was saying.

"Did you say James is comin' the day?" she said at last.

"Aye!"

"But! . . ."

"He wasn't drowned after all!"

"Not drowned?"

"No. We'd better be gettin' the tay ready. He'll mebbe be here soon!"

Esther went to the window and looked out on to the sea.

"D'you hear me, Esther?" said Mrs. Martin. "Come an' lay the table for the tay!"

She still stood looking out of the window, while Mrs. Martin dragged the table into the centre of the room, and began to spread a white cloth on it.

"We'll need two or three barm bracks and some crumpets, Essie," said Mrs. Martin.

Esther turned to her sister. "Martha," she said, "do you know what you're sayin'? Is it James that's comin' home? . . ."

"Aye, Esther, I know rightly what I'm sayin'. It's James himself. It's my man that's comin' back! . . . Will you fill the kettle!"

Esther took the kettle to the tap in the scullery and filled it.

"It's a long time he's been away," she said, as she put it on the coals.

"Aye, it is. It's a long time, Esther!"

Esther sat down before the fire, and folded her hands in her lap. Her eyes were shining very brightly, and her bosom rose and fell quickly.

CHAPTER VI

ESTHER had been sitting at the fire for some while, when suddenly she got up and walked quickly to the door of the cottage.

"Are you goin' out, Esther?" said Mrs. Martin, placing a plate of toasted barm brack on the fender to keep warm.

Esther did not reply. She stood in the doorway, looking up the street. The dusk had fallen now, and oil-lamps burning in the houses threw a pale light through the windows on to the pavement. A young girl was closing the shutters on the window of her home as Esther gazed about her. There was a sweet smell of turf fires mingling with the smell of burning furze and the strong, enlivening air of the sea. Mrs. Martin went up to her sister and touched her on the arm.

"Esther!" she said quietly.

Esther turned to her, and she saw that she was crying. She drew her into the kitchen and shut the door, and then put her arms round her and clasped her closely to her.

"You're not thinkin' about what happened long ago?" she said. "Sure, that's all over now!"

Esther nestled her head on her sister's breast, and let her tears run freely. "I don't know what I'm thinkin' about," she sobbed. "It's that

sudden . . . him comin' back . . . . I'm all throughother, that's what I am, an' I don't hardly know what I'm doin'!" She kept silence for a moment or two, and then said anxiously, "You're sure it's him all right?"

"Aye, it's him right enough. No other man would write the way he does, just tellin' you he's comin' an' not sayin' what's happened him all this time!"

"I wonder where he was all the while! . . ."

"The dear only knows!" replied Mrs. Martin. "Come an' sit down by the fire, Esther, an' not be tirin' yourself, too!"

Esther resumed her seat by the fire, and Mrs. Martin finished her work of laying the table for the tea. She took a moustache-cup down from its nail high up on the dresser, and laid it on the table, and when she had done so, she laughed lightly.

"It's quare to see a moustache-cup on our table again!" she said. "Jamesey hasn't got a moustache, an' he says he wouldn't use a moustache-cup if he had!"

Esther answered listlessly. "They're gey an' ould-fashioned, moustache-cups!"

"Aye. The style of things is changin'. People's not like what they were. I daresay we'll see a quare differs in him when he does come!"

Esther turned her head uneasily towards her sister, and made as if to speak to her, but she changed her mind, and looked again towards the fire.

"Were you wantin' to say anything to me, Esther?" said Mrs. Martin.

"No! . . . Did James mention me in the letter?"

"He didn't mention no one but himself!"

"I wonder what he'll be like. . . ."

"He'll be changed, I'm thinkin'. We'll mebbe hardly know him, he'll be that altered!"

"Aye, I suppose he will!" She sat back in the chair, and let her mind fill with memories. "I remember him as well as anything," she said. "It's just like as if he went away only yesterday!"

Mrs. Martin brought a chair beside her and sat down. "You always had a good memory, Esther," she said. "The childer'll be distracted with joy when they hear about him comin' back. I didn't tell them til I was sure. It was sore work not tellin' Aggie, an' her wonderin' why I didn't stop in the shop the day. He never knew about her. She was born after he went away. You mind that, Esther?"

"Aye, I do!"

"It must be quare to be wanderin' the world, an' you havin' a fine girl growin' up, an' you not knowin' nothin' about it. It would be a quare thing for a man to meet his own child in a strange place, an' him not know who it was. There's mebbe some that happens til!"

Esther nodded her head, but did not speak.

"He'll be proud of her when he does see her. She's a fine girl, an' her growin' up into a woman! . . . Are you not listenin', Esther?"

"I'm listenin', Martha!"

Mrs. Martin leant forward and touched her sister's hands. "What is it, Esther?" she said gently.

"Martha!"

"Yes, Esther, dear!"

"Mebbe—mebbe you'll not be wantin' me to stay here any more?"

"Why wouldn't I be wantin' you to stay, Esther?"

Esther hesitated a little while before she replied. She interlaced her fingers in Mrs. Martin's, and they sat thus in silence.

"Why wouldn't I be wantin' you to stay?" Mrs. Martin said again.

"You know why he went away!" said Esther softly.

"Why he went away?" Indeed, she knew well, but she had no mind to reveal her knowledge to anyone. "He went away because it was time for him to go," she said.

Esther patted the linked fingers with her free hand. "Aye, but you know well what I mean, Martha, though you don't want to say it. It's no good pretendin' about it! You mind about him an' me, don't you?"

"Ah, don't go an' be thinkin' about that, Esther, dear! Sure, that's near sixteen years ago. No, it's more! It's more nor sixteen years ago. It would be a poor thing for a woman to be hoardin' the like of that in her mind all them years!"

"You have to be rememberin' something," Esther replied, "when you've little to treasure!" She got up as she spoke, and stood in the centre of the kitchen, wearily stretching herself. "I'd better be goin', Martha. You've been that kind to me, I wouldn't bring trouble on you again for the whole world!"

They began to speak openly. For the first time

in their lives they spoke of Esther's love for Martha's husband, and spoke of it frankly.

"I went with him," said Esther, in the toneless voice of one who speaks of things that happen and cannot be helped. "Did you know that, Martha? I went with him. Up at the Moat one night."

"I thought you did," Mrs. Martin answered quietly.

"That wasn't the only time, neither?"

"No?"

Esther came back to the fire and stood by her sister's side. "There were other times," she said in a whisper.

Neither of them spoke. They remained silent, while the firelight sent red flames about the kettle, and lit the room with sudden leaps of light that cast great jutting shadows round the room. The kettle began to boil, and they could hear the slow song of the bubbling water in it, and then it grew louder and louder until it silenced the noise of the sea outside on the rocks, and the splash and explosion of great waves throwing themselves into caverns in the cliffs.

"The kettle's boilin'!" said Mrs. Martin, lifting it off the chain from which it was suspended over the coals.

Esther laughed nervously. "It's funny," she said, "I never had a child!"

Mrs. Martin placed the kettle on the hob, and then took the teapot off the fender, and filled it with hot water.

"Aye," she said, "it's funny!"

"I don't know when he'll come," she added, putting the teapot on the table. "So we'd better

be havin' our tay, an' then mebbe you'll go down to the shop, an' let Aggie come up for hers. . . ."

"You see, don't you," said Esther, without stirring from the fire, "that I'd better be goin'. It'll mebbe be hard to do right, an' I couldn't thole to hurt you, Martha!"

"Come an' have your tay, Esther!"

Esther moved to the table, and took her place, and they began the meal, after Martha had bowed her head and said aloud, "For what we are about to receive, thank God. Amen."

"Mebbe you're right, Esther!" Mrs. Martin said, handing the plate of toasted barm brack to her sister. "Would you like to go an' live with Henry an' his wife?"

Esther shook her head decisively. "No," she said, "I couldn't thole that. I can't bear Jane, an' you know I can't. I'll mebbe go to Belfast or to America or somewhere out of this. It would be better for me to be away nor to be here!"

"I wouldn't like you to go far, Esther! . . ."

Esther broke a piece of the barm brack and put it in her mouth. "There'll mebbe be little change in him after all, when he comes," she said. "Only his hair grey, an' his face aged, an' his heart the way it was when he went away!"

Mrs. Martin drank some of her tea, glancing over the edge of her cup at Esther as she did so.

"You're changed yourself, Esther," she said. "You're quarely altered. Your face isn't so soft an' roun' as it used to be, an' your eyes is not so bright as they were. You're altered a great deal. You were a fine-lookin' girl one time, just like Aggie. But you're not now! You've spoiled yourself

someway, I don't hardly know what way, but you've spoiled yourself. You're gettin' to look quaren like me, with a sharp face, the way a Mahaffy woman gets sometimes when she's ould or hasn't had her wish. An' James was the great boy for young, soft girls, Esther! You mind that, don't you? He liked to look at them if he couldn't do no more. It was like you an' me goin' down to the shore, an' lookin' at the watter. . . . Mebbe, you'll not have no call to be goin' away! You forget you were only twenty when he was here afore, an' now you're over thirty-six, Esther! You're not the same any more!"

"I'm not improved on it, you mean?" said Esther

"You are not, dear!" She waited for a few seconds before she asked the question she had been trying to ask all the evening. "Are you still in love with him, Esther?" she said.

"I think I am, Martha."

They could hear the click-tick, click-tick of the clock beating steadily, and now and then the thud of the sea outside.

"Then mebbe it would be better for you to go somewhere else, Esther, if you feel that way. I couldn't bear it again, dear! I tholed enough that time, an' I could thole no more. I must have him to myself now, Esther, after all I've bore for him. It's been hard an' lonesome, an' many's the time I had a bitter word on my tongue to say to you, an' a bitter thought in my mind against you both, but I kept quiet, for what was the use of saying' things an' thinkin' things. . . . You near took him away from me that time, Esther, dear, but you didn't. I can't let you do it again, dear!"

"Mebbe I wouldn't be able if I'm turnin' ould an' thin the way you say I am," said Esther bitterly.

"Mebbe not. Anyway, we'll think about it in a wee while. There's no call to be botherin' our heads about him this minute. Will you pass your cup?"

"I don't want no more, thank you, Martha!"

"Then mebbe you'll go down an' tell Aggie to come up for her tay, an' you can tell her her da's comin' home if you like, though mebbe he'll not come after all. We'll shut the shop early the night. . . ."

"Aye," said Esther, getting ready to go out. "Will you be wantin' anything extra in?"

"There's everything in the house, thank you, Esther!"

Esther stood in the doorway indecisively. "I wonder will he come soon," she said, almost to herself.

"There's no good in you standin' there wonderin', Esther, dear. He'll come when he's here, an' not before, an' the dear only knows when he'll be here. Go on down, now, to the shop, for Aggie'll be famished if you don't hurry!"

Esther looked into the street. "Here's Jamesey comin'," she said, as she turned to go out.

Jamesey Martin came up to the door as she did so.

"How're you, Aunt Esther?" he exclaimed, walking quickly into the kitchen as he greeted her.

"I'm bravely, thank you, Jamesey!" said Esther, as she walked off towards the shop.

Jamesey Martin, who was nineteen years of age, had a quick, sharp manner. His voice was domineering, and when he spoke his words rattled out of his mouth like gun-shots. His looks were good, and he resembled his Aunt Esther, except that his features had not that drawn, waiting look which hers had, nor was there a note of querulousness in his voice. He threw his cap carelessly into the window-seat.

"Is that you, Jamesey?" Mrs. Martin said, looking up at him and smiling.

He went over to her and kissed her. "Aye, ma. Is the tay ready?"

"Your Aunt Esther an' me's had ours. I'll make some fresh tay for you. It'll be ready in a wee while!"

"Where's my Aunt Esther away to?" he said, drawing a chair up to the table. He began to forage among the remnants of his mother's meal for tasty bits to eat. "I declare to me God, you've got barm brack! Is there a party on or what?"

"She's away down to the shop to tell Aggie to come up for her tay," Mrs. Martin answered, as she brewed the tea.

"It's not often she goes that length. Is there anything ailin' yourself that you're here an' not there?"

"Nothin' at all, son! . . ."

"Is the tay near ready yet?" he said, turning to the fire, and interrupting her speech.

"In a wee while! . . ."

"I hope Aggie'll not be long over her tay, for I want to go over to Millisle with my Aunt Esther. There's a wee girl from Belfast stoppin' with Maggie

Cather, ma, an' she's the quare nice wee girl, too. Man-a-dear, I'm just dotin' on her, but I don't like to go over by meself. It looks too much like the thing, an' if my Aunt Esther was with me, I could let on I was leavin' her up the road, an' her feard of the dark ! . . ."

Mrs. Martin brought the teapot to the table and poured out a cup of tea for her son. She handed it to him, and he began to drink noisily. She rubbed his head with her hand, and ruffled his hair. " You're an awful boy for girls," she said, " an' you're always dotin' on some one ! "

" Och, ma, dear, quit ! " he replied, " you have my hair all scattered. Have you any more of that barm brack ? "

She took a plate of toasted barm brack from the oven and set it before him.

" You da's comin' home, Jamesey ! " she said.

He turned to her quickly, and saw that she was smiling at him. " Ah, for dear sake, ma, quit coddin' ! " he said. " Sure, you're the quare ould humbug ! Give us a drop more tay, for I'm near dead with the drouth ! "

" You're da's comin' home, Jamesey, son ! I wouldn't be tellin' you a lie, child-a-dear ! "

Jamesey was so startled by her announcement that he forgot himself and swore in her presence.

" Holy Jases ! " he exclaimed.

" I had a letter from him yesterday mornin'. He's comin' the day. He'll mebbe be here any minute ! "

He sat gaping at her, and she could not help smiling at the comical appearance of him. His

mouth was open, and he held a piece of the toasted bun in his hand.

" Shut your mouth, dear," she said.

He carried the piece of barm brack to his mouth, and slowly chewed it while he reflected on what his mother had said to him. " You're havin' me on ! " he said after a while.

" Did I ever make a cod of you, Jamesey ? " she asked.

" Aye, indeed, you did. Many's a time ! "

" Ah, but not anything important, Jamesey, dear. Not about your da . . . He's comin' home, he says ! " She put her hand into her bosom and took out the letter she had received from her husband. " There's the letter itself ! "

He took it from her and read it through and then gave it back to her. " It's a quare sort of a letter that, for a man to write to his wife, an' him not seein' her the length of time he's been away from you ! What like was he ? "

" Very like you, son ! "

" I wonder where he's been all the time. Do you mind that story used to be goin' about, about him bein' captured by cannibals an' near ate. . . . Och, wasn't that the quare ould cod ! My Uncle Henry was quarely took in by it, an' him writin' til the ould Queen an' all ! "

" He'll tell us where he was when he comes back ! "

She still held the letter in her hand, and he reached over and took it from her. " I wonder did he write it at all, or is it some lad tryin' to be funny. By the Holy God, if it's one of them hoaxers, I'll skelp the head off him ! "

"Jamesey, son, don't be takin' God's name in vain the way you're doin'. I don't think it's a hoax—it's like him to write that abrupt way, but we'll know in a wee while. He might be here any time!"

The boy got up from the table, and stood with his back to the fire.

"It's a quare set-out, this," he said half to himself.

"Will you not be glad to see him back, son?"

"Och, I daresay I will, only it's that sudden I don't hardly know what to do. Does my Uncle Henry know he's comin'?"

Mrs. Martin shook her head.

"Well, I suppose some one ought to tell him. I'll dander round to his house, an' I'll mebbe step into the shop on my way back, an' bring my Aunt Esther home! . . ."

"Sure, what's the good of that? You'll not be goin' to Millisle the night, will you?"

"No, but! . . ." He stopped, as if he could not account for his desire to bring his aunt back with him. "Well, anyhow, I'll bring her," he said.

"All right, then. You can close the shop, an' bring Aggie along with you!"

He went out and left her alone. It seemed a strange thing to her that her son should be so devoted to his aunt. They were like two chums. He confided in her and told her of his loves, for he had a changeable heart, and loved often though not long. Jamesey loved his mother, too, loved her very dearly, but she was his mother, and there was something in the relationship which made him shy of her until he had told his stories to his Aunt

Esther, and then as if he had become more familiar with them, he could easily speak of them to his mother. Sometimes Mrs. Martin felt angry when he sought so insistently for his aunt. He was so like his father, and his father had been Esther's lover . . . but her nature was very large, and anger dissolved speedily in the warmth of her heart.

"Mebbe, it's as well," she would say, "for Esther to be havin' him love her like that, than for her not to be havin' no one at all!"

CHAPTER VII

When Jamesey had been gone from the cottage some while, Mrs. Martin closed the shutters on the windows, and lit the oil lamp. She glanced about the room, when she had done this, and she could not help thinking how much more comfortable the house was than it had been when James went away. There was very little of old Mrs. Crothers' goods left in the place; all her furniture had been acquired, piece by piece, at sales here and sales there; and it was solid, fine furniture with the marks of years on it. The Sebastopol on the mantelshelf—which Jamesey, when he was a child, would always call the Sevastapull—had been Mrs. Crothers' property, and so, too, had been the china ornaments and the clock on the wall, but all else was Mrs. Martin's.

"Heth," she said to herself, "he's comin' home til a better house nor he left behind him when he went away!"

She had settled herself warmly before the fire, when she heard the latch rattling, and then her brother Henry came into the kitchen followed by his wife. Henry Mahaffy had grown very round and very short of breath, and the roundness of him made him seem smaller than he was. His eyes were little, but they had not the sparkle which

little eyes often have: they were dull, humourless and torpid; they were fat eyes. If Henry Mahaffy's eyes could have been taken out of his head and placed apart from his body, a moderately intelligent man would have known instantly he saw them that the body from which they came was a fat body: not a body that is fat with jolliness, a moving, palpable thing shaking with laughter, but just a piece of corpulence; obese; a flabby hulk of tissue. His wife had none of his fatness, but she had much of his flatulence of spirit. She was a lean, acid woman of querulous and inquisitive disposition. She had the hardness of granite but none of the glint. Her nature had always been stony, and the passage of the years had softened none of her asperities. Her soul had ossified; for the desire that she had for a child had never been satisfied, and the love that might have come out of that flinty breast had turned sour in her heart.

"Are you in?" said Henry Mahaffy, puffing as he came through the door.

Mrs. Martin had started up at his entry, but when she saw who it was, she sat down again.

"Oh, is that you, Henry?" she said. "An' you, Jane? You startled me, the pair of you. I thought it was. . . . Come on in, do, an' sit down. You're the great strangers!"

Henry Mahaffy pulled an arm-chair up to the fire, and sat down heavily in it. "Ah, God help us!" he said, and that was his way of sighing with relief. His wife, dour and implacable, stood in the middle of the floor, her arms folded, her lips

tightly set, and her mantle and bonnet signifying anger by their stiff look.

"Aye, it's a good while since we put our feet in this house," said Henry Mahaffy, stretching his hands towards the fire to warm them. "An' if it wasn't for the news Jamesey's just after bringin' us, it might be a good wee while yet before we darkened your door!"

Mrs. Mahaffy, still standing in the centre of the floor, took the talk from her husband. "Aye," she said, "that's why we're here, Martha. We're mebbe not welcome! . . ."

"You're right an' welcome, Jane, whenever you choose to call!" Mrs. Martin said.

"I'm glad to hear it. But even if we weren't welcome, we'd 'a' come, for Henry's the head of your family, Martha, an' it's only right and proper he should be informed of what goes on. Is James home yet?"

"No, he's not. Sit down, Jane, an' take off your things, an' don't be unneighbourly. Here, give your bonnet an' cape to me. You'll stop an' have a bite of something to ate!"

Mrs. Mahaffy handed her bonnet and mantle to her sister-in-law, and then took a chair close to her husband, where she sat as stiffly as she had stood before, with her hands folded in her lap.

"We've had our tay, thank you, Martha!" she said acidly. "Forby, we couldn't think of troublin' you. . . ."

"It's no trouble to give a person a cup of tay, Jane, an' a bite to ate!"

"An' it's such a long time since we were in this house that we hardly like to take anything!"

Mrs. Martin laid Mrs. Mahaffy's garments aside in a safe place. "It's not my fault, Jane," she said, "you've not been here this long while!"

Henry Mahaffy rolled himself about in his chair, and slapped his knees, and said, "Well, well!" and "Now, now!" and tried to act magnanimously. "Let bygones be bygones, Jane, woman!" he said. "You wouldn't be quarrellin' on a day like this, with James returning to his home an' all. This is a time for rejoicin', Jane, an' liftin' up your heart to sing a tuneful song to the Lord for all His wondrous deeds. Aye! Aye, aye! So James has come back, Martha?" He turned to his sister as he spoke.

"Not yet, Henry! I don't know when he'll be here. He writ a letter, an' said he'd come as soon as I got it. I received it yesterday, but he's not here yet!"

"Some one's been coddin' you, Martha!" said Jane Mahaffy.

Mrs. Martin showed the letter she had received from her husband to them, and they read it and re-read it.

"Well, I'm surprised at you, Martha!" said Henry Mahaffy, as he returned the letter to her, "lettin' yourself be took in by a thing like that. Sure, anybody with half an eye in their head could see that was a hoax. A man was missin' for sixteen years wouldn't be writin' a letter like that to his wife, not givin' no explanation or nothin'. I declare to my God, Martha, you're like a child over him. I thought you had more wit!"

She smiled at him. "You can say what you like,

Henry, an' I don't blame you for sayin' it, for it's a strange letter for any woman to get from her man, an' a stranger letter for a woman to get from a man she hasn't seen the length of time I haven't seen him, but all the same, Henry, it's from him right enough. I know it is. It's the kind of him to write like that. I don't know when he'll come, but I know that he will come ! "

" I wonder what he was doin' in America ? " said Jane.

" I don't know," Mrs. Martin answered. " Something or other, I suppose ! "

" It's a quare sort of a story. . . . America's not that far that he couldn't write or come home. . . . . Wasn't there some story ? " continued Jane Mahaffy, but her husband, alarmed lest the past should be called up too closely for his liking, interrupted her.

" Now, we'll not be rakin' up ould tales, Jane, that's better let alone. Martha knows no more nor you an' me about him, an' we'll just have to wait til he comes home before we find out what he's been doin' all this time ! "

" You'd think he'd run away from you," said Jane.

" Aye, you would, wouldn't you ? " Mrs. Martin replied.

" Och, go 'long with you, Jane ! " exclaimed Henry Mahaffy. " What would he run away from her for, an' her a Mahaffy, an' got a gran' business ! "

" There's many a thing a man might leave a woman for, even if she was a Mahaffy. . . . Well now he's comin' home, I hope he'll stop home, an' be a comfort to you, Martha, in your ould age,

though it's poor comfort a man is to any woman. I don't know what you'll do with him ! "

Her husband sat up in his seat and glared angrily at her. " That's an unnatural thing you're after sayin', Jane, woman ! " he said. " An' you know well it is, for all you'll mebbe not admit it ! "

But Mrs. Mahaffy would not be persuaded from her doleful mood.

" There's no comfort in men," she said, " only trouble an' botheration. An' what does she want with a man when she has two childer, an' me with no childer at all but an ould footer of a man, spittin' an' cursin' in the corner ! "

" That'll do, Jane," said Henry Mahaffy. " I'll have no more of that talk. I'm no curser, an' if I do spit, sure it's only natural to a man that has any sort of a mouth on him at all ! "

" It's not natural, Henry Mahaffy, but spreadin' disease it is, the way you can see for yourself on the placards they do be puttin' up on walls in big letters that the like of you can read. Wasn't there a man come down special from Dublin with a magic lantern to show you what your stomach is like, an' it riddled with consumption ? "

" It wasn't a stomach," said her husband ; " it was a lung ! "

" Well, stomachs an' lungs is all one to the like of you," Mrs. Mahaffy retorted. She turned to Mrs. Martin : " What would you do with the like of him in the house, Martha ? "

" There's mebbe worse nor Henry in the world ! "

" Aye, there is, an' a dale worse, too ! " said

Henry Mahaffy with fat emphasis. "An' there's few is better, though it's meself that says it!"

"Well, mebbe that's true," his wife exclaimed. "God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform. But I'd sooner have two childer in the house any day nor an ould, spittin', cursin' man!"

"Aren't you the discontented woman, Jane Mahaffy?" said Mrs. Martin. "You would think to hear you it was Henry's fault you had no childer. An' what's childer after all—only childer! Many a night when James was away to sea, an' me be my lone with Jamesey asleep in the cradle, I'd 'a' give the world an' all to have him back again. I'd lie awake at night an' hear nothin' but the wind roarin' round the house, an' the sea, or mebbe a screechin' bird or the child cryin' in his cradle. Aye, Jane, I'd 'a' been glad of him lyin' beside me if it was only to turn an' damn me. A seafarin' man has no call to be marryin' a young girl, an' be leavin' her by her lone, an' her with a child comin'!"

"Ah, sure, there has to be sailors," said her brother, "an' sailors needs women the same as any other man!"

"You're mebbe right, Henry!" replied Mrs. Martin, "but, heth, it's hard!"

They were silent for a little while. The wind had risen, and it beat along the road in swift gusts, and shook the trees and bushes into a mournful melody. They could hear the waves making a great charge on the rocks, and the noise of the collision and the hiss of the spray kept them quiet for a longer time than was natural with Jane Mahaffy.

"That's a wild sort of a night comin' on!" said Henry.

Mrs. Martin walked to the door and looked out into the street.

"It's beginning to rain, I think!" she said, holding her hand out before her. "Aye, it is. It's turned rough, the night!"

"Dear bless us," moaned Mrs. Mahaffy, "it's always turnin' rough!"

Her husband took out his pipe, and began to fill it. "It would be quare," he said, as he lit the pipe, "if it wasn't James at all, but another man lettin' on to be him!"

"Ah, quit talkin', Henry, an' be dacent!" exclaimed Mrs. Mahaffy.

"Ah, now," he continued, "you have to be quaren careful. I heard tell once of a woman lost her man as it was thought, an' three men, one after the other, turned up, an' said they were him, an' weren't drowned at all. It was the bit of money her aunt left her that they had their hearts set on, an' they started fightin' one another about her. She had to send for the peelers before she could get redd of them. She was that upset an' vexed about it that when her man did come back, she gave him in charge, thinkin' mebbe it was another one lettin' on. She couldn't bear to have him next or near her, an' she went into a decline!"

"It's a quare thing to think of three men fightin' for one woman, when there's many a woman in the world can't get one man. Look at Esther, now! She's never married!" his wife exclaimed.

"Mebbe, she doesn't want to be!" said Mrs. Martin.

Mrs. Mahaffy snorted contemptuously. There was no love lost between her and Esther.

"I wouldn't like to make her an offer an' not mean it, if I was a man," she said.

"Now, don't be goin' on about Esther, Jane," said her husband, "for you'll only work yourself into a rage if you do that. What'll James be doin' when he comes home, Martha?" he asked of his sister.

Mrs. Martin had not thought of that. She had been so possessed by the idea that he was returning to her that she had not considered anything else. She did not care what he did. He could idle his time away if he chose to do so, and, sure, after all the hard times he must have had, it would be poor enough reward to let him sit still in peace and happiness for the rest of his life. The shop was prosperous enough to maintain him as comfortably as the rest of them without any necessity for him to do a hand's turn.

"Ah, but, you can't have a man lyin' about the house doin' nothin' all day," said Henry Mahaffy sapiently. "He'd be away in the mind in no time at all!"

"Indeed then," exclaimed his wife, "men's not so easy driv' out of their minds as all that, or there's plenty in this town would be ravin' mad!"

The door opened as she spoke, and Esther entered quickly. A gust of wind blew in with her, and sent a spurt of flame up the glass-chimney of the oil-lamp, and caused the pictures on the wall to rattle perilously. She pushed the door to as soon as she could, but had difficulty in closing it immediately because of the force of the storm.

"Has he come yet?" she said.

Her eyes were brighter than they had been earlier in the evening, so bright were they, indeed, that they seemed to have a feverish glow. She spoke her words jerkily, and when she had uttered them, she moistened her lips with her tongue. She was standing in the shadow by the door, and the others could not see that her breasts were rising and falling rapidly like a rough sea.

"Not yet, Esther," replied Mrs. Martin. "Henry an' Jane's here!"

Esther nodded her head and then walked towards the dresser where she laid her hat. "Aye, I see!" she said. "How're you, Henry?" She ignored her sister-in-law.

"I'm bravely, thank you, Esther," Henry answered. "An' how is yourself?"

"Middlin'!" she said, dragging a chair towards the fire. Mrs. Martin took hold of her as she came near. "Esther, woman," she exclaimed, "you're wringin' wet!"

"The rain come on so sudden! It's not so bad, Martha, an' I'll dry by the fire. . . ."

"Heth, an' you'll not then, Esther. You'll go upstairs to your room this minute an' change every stitch you have on you. I'll not have you catchin' your death of cold!"

She gently pushed Esther towards the stairs, and Esther willessly went. She had reached the foot of the stairs, and was about to mount them when Jane Mahaffy, folding her hands more closely and tightening her lips still more, turned to her, and said, "I have health, too, Esther Mahaffy!"

"Have you?" answered Esther indifferently.

"Aye, I have. I thought you didn't know, for you never asked after it as any decent person would!"

Esther mounted a step. "You're sure to be all right," she said.

"It's good manners to ask if a person's well even if you hope they're not!" Mrs. Mahaffy exclaimed.

Mrs. Martin waved her hand at Jane Mahaffy. "Now, now, Jane," she said, "don't be put out. Sure, Esther hasn't an unkind thought in her head about you. You know that rightly!"

"I know nothin' of the sort! . . ."

Esther had stopped on the stairs to listen, and was leaning over the banisters looking down on her angry sister-in-law.

"Jane, woman," said Henry Mahaffy, "you're beside yourself altogether. It'll not be much of a welcome for James if he comes in an' finds us all wranglin' together!"

"It'll mind him of ould times," Esther said sarcastically as she turned to go on up the stairs.

But she did not go far. Jane Mahaffy let the wells of bitterness in her heart overflow. "I hope," she said, with malice and all uncharitableness in her voice, "I hope you'll give him no call to be mindin' ould times, Miss Esther!"

Esther stood still for a moment, and then she came quickly down the stairs into the room again.

"What were you saying', Jane Mahaffy?" she said.

"That'll do, Esther," Mrs. Martin interrupted.

"That'll do, do you hear? Jane, you needn't say no more!"

"You're too soft, Martha," replied Mrs. Mahaffy. "That's what you are. Sure wasn't it the talk of Ballyreagh, the way them two were goin' on!"

Esther turned on her passionately. "It was you made the talk," she exclaimed.

"There was no call for anyone to make any talk! The pair of you was busy makin' it yourselves. Didn't Martha catch you huggin' one another behind the door one night, an' didn't Henry walk into the pair of you in the dark up at the Moat. . . "

"There's no need to be draggin' all that up again," Mrs. Martin pleaded.

"I hope not, indeed!"

It seemed to Mrs. Martin that Esther, in her anger, was about to strike Mrs. Mahaffy. She rose and caught hold of her sister's arm. "Quieten yourself, Esther!" she said soothingly; but Esther shook herself free, and stood over Mrs. Mahaffy in a wild way.

"What do you mean, Jane Mahaffy?" she shouted at her. "Are you makin' me out a bad woman or what?"

"You know well enough what I mean," Mrs. Mahaffy replied.

"What are you insinuatin' against me?"

"I'm not insinuatin' nothin'. If you had bad in your mind, it wasn't me that put it there!"

She began to be afraid of Esther, and in her fear she tried to make her voice gentler. "Far be it from me," she said, "to utter any bad about anyone. Judge not, that ye be not judged:

That's God's word, an' I always try to act on God's word wherever I am ! "

Esther's temper cooled almost as suddenly as it warmed, and she went to the seat in the window and sat down.

" I'm not heedin' you at all, Jane Mahaffy ! " she said. " Sure, every one knows rightly what makes your tongue so bitter. A woman that can't have a child ! . . ."

The rage that had consumed Esther for a moment or two was a poor, pale thing to the rage that devoured Mrs. Mahaffy when she heard this taunt. She stood up and clenched her fists, and her lips moved in a frenzy so that little flecks of foam gathered in the corners of her mouth. She could not speak for a while. Then the rage in her broke, and she ran across the floor to Esther, and shook her fist in her face.

" How dare you make a mock of me ? " she shouted. " How dare you taunt me to my face, you whore you ! . . ."

There was a long sob in Esther's voice. She stood up and faced the angry woman, and it seemed for a time that one of them must die ; but the hurt that each had done to the other was so great that neither of them spoke. They stood thus, staring at each other, until Henry Mahaffy, in a fright, caught hold of his wife's arm, and pulled her away from Esther.

" That's no way to be goin' on ! " he said, pushing her back into her chair.

" She made little of me ! " she mumbled.

" Well, you shouldn't 'a' called her out of her name. . . ." He turned to Esther. " Think shame

of yourself, Esther, to be tauntin' her with what can't be helped. You could help what you done. You were young and thoughtless ! . . ."

Esther swept her hair back from her brow, and then stood with her back to her brother. "I want none of your sermons, Henry ! " she said.

"You're a headstrong woman, Esther, an' you'll come to harm by it. You'd only be doin' right if you were to beg Jane's pardon for what you said to her ! "

"I'll beg none of her pardon ! " said Esther.

Mrs. Mahaffy's rage had unnerved her. She began to cry, and when she had dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief she turned to Esther and said, "May God forgive you on the Judgment Day, Esther Mahaffy, for I'll not ! "

"Nobody wants your forgiveness ! . . ."

The old woman sat snivelling in her chair, and her fingers crumpled her handerchief. . . . Mrs. Martin's mind went back to a similar scene that had been enacted almost on that very spot. She saw the gnarled and broken form of Mrs. Crothers, huddled before the fire, with a clove in her gums, and a handkerchief in her hands. . . .

"Don't do that, Jane ! " she said gently, as she stayed the moving fingers. "Be dryin' your eyes, Jane, an' don't pay no heed to what was said. Sure, we're all upset by James comin' home again, an' disturbed in our minds. We'll all be pleasant together in a wee while, an' not be sayin' angry words to one another again ! "

She became conscious of the fact that her brother was rebuking Esther.

"Martha's forgive you, Esther," he was saying,

" but all the same you done wrong, an' I hope for all our sakes you'll not be doin' it again. I'm oulder nor you are by a good wee bit, an' I'm the head of your family, so it's my duty to talk to you this way, though God knows I don't like doin' it. When you know as much about the world as I do, you'll know it's not right nor customary to go about kissin' an' huggin' your sister's man. It's bad enough to be huggin' an' kissin' another person's man, but your own sister's. . . . It's not decent, so it's not ! "

She got up and intervened between them, for she was afraid that Esther would be enraged again.

" Wheesht, Henry, can't you, an' leave her alone. She was only a slip of a girl when she done that," she said. " Go on upstairs, Esther, an' change your clothes, or you'll be catchin' your death."

She put her arms about her sister, and moved across the floor to the stairs with her ; and when they had reached the foot of them, she patted Esther caressingly on the shoulder. " Don't be heedin' them ! " she whispered.

Esther looked at her queerly for a moment, and then she put her arms round her neck, and kissed her passionately, and then ran quickly up the stairs with the tears streaming from her eyes.

" That's the wild woman ! " said Henry Mahaffy, striking a match to light his pipe.

" She's the devil's mate ! " said his wife.

CHAPTER VIII

Mrs. Martin went back to her seat at the fire and began to poke the embers. "It's a wild night," she said, throwing pieces of turf on to the fire.

"Aye," her brother replied, "it's turned out rough! Them people down for the day from Belfast'll be dreepin' with the wet. What do you say, Jane?"

Jane had not spoken. She had sobbed.

"Will I make you a drop of tay, the both of you?" said Mrs. Martin, "or will you wait for a bit of supper with the childer when they come in? Dear only knows what's keepin' them. They ought to 'a' been here long ago!"

"A wee drop of tay would do no harm at all!" said Henry. "I'm thinkin' your man'll not be here the night, Martha!"

"Mebbe not, Henry! Wheesht!"

She stood listening for a moment. She could hear a voice outside, and the footseps of some one coming towards the door.

"What is it?" asked Henry.

"It's some one. . . ."

Mrs. Mahaffy forgot her woes, and putting her handkerchief hastily away, began to sit rigidly again in her chair.

"God save us," she said, "I feel in the quare state now he's comin'!"

"Who's comin'?" snapped her husband.

"It's James, isn't it? Mebbe, anyway! Do you think he'll know me, Henry?"

"Och, how do I know?" replied her husband in a surly tone. "I suppose now, you'll be rollin' your eyes at him, the same's the rest. He'll be bringin' some trouble with him as sure as you're livin'!"

Mrs. Martin put up her hand. "It's the childer," she said, "I know their step!"

The door opened, and Jamesey and Aggie entered.

"Is my da here yet?" said Jamesey, flinging his cap carelessly into the window-seat as he had done before.

"Not yet, dear!"

Aggie went to her mother, and caressed her. "Och, ma," she said, "aren't you the quare one not to tell me what was on your mind. I'm just dyin' to see him. It's strange to have a da livin' an' you never set your eyes on him!"

"Aye, it's quare indeed!" said her Uncle Henry.

Jamesey and Aggie were late in coming home because he had thought of going to the station to wait for the trains coming in from Belfast. "But he never come," he concluded. "Of course, we mightn't 'a' knowed him!"

"Ah, wouldn't you know your own da the minute you saw him, an' you lookin' for him," exclaimed Aggie. "I've never seen him, but I'd know him anywhere. Isn't his photo in the album?"

Mrs. Martin put her arms round the girl and

kissed her, and Aggie snuggled up into her mother's clasp.

"He went away before she was born," she said. "I was here by myself, an' no man to keep me company, an' her the hard child to get born. A woman that has her man at sea has a great deal to bear."

"Aye, an' then him to go an' get lost the way he done!" muttered Jamesey.

"I wonder will he bring anything with him, presents an' things!" said Aggie.

"It'll be enough if he brings himself," replied her mother.

Jane Mahaffy laughed. "*If* he brings himself," she said. "By the look of things that's just what he's not goin' to do.

"Don't be sayin' that, Jane!" said Mrs. Martin. "I don't like to hear you makin' fun of it. . . ."

Aggie glanced angrily at her aunt. "I wonder you have the heart to talk that way, Aunt Jane!" she said. "My da writ an' said he was comin', didn't he, an' what would he do that for if he didn't want to come?"

Henry Mahaffy suddenly slapped his knee, and said, "Boys-a-boys" several times.

"What ails you, Henry?" his wife demanded.

"I've just thought of a fearful thing," he replied. He turned to Mrs. Martin and gazed at her intently for a few moments.

"You've thought of what?" his wife said, jogging his arm.

"Man alive," he said in a slow voice, as if his thoughts were overpowering him, "supposin' you'd married again Martha! . . ."

Jamesey turned away in disgust. "Ah, for dear sake, Uncle Henry!" he said.

Mrs. Martin smiled at her brother. She was accustomed to his fearful thoughts, and they left her unmoved.

"Aye," she replied, "that would have been a trouble to us all, but I wasn't one for marryin' twice!" She turned to Aggie, and drew the girl to her. "Would you 'a' liked a step-father, Aggie," she said.

"Och, ma! . . ."

"Sure, what differs would it 'a' made to her," exclaimed Mrs. Mahaffy. "She never saw her own da, an' a step-da might 'a' done her as well as a da that she never knew nothin' about!"

"Aye, there's somethin' in that, Jane!" her husband said.

Aggie frowned at her uncle and aunt, and exclaimed petulantly, "I wouldn't have a step-da for no money!"

"Ah, now," said her uncle, "there's many is worse nor step-das. I knew a man once was made miserable by his step-childer expectin' him to be cruel til them, an' him wouldn't lift his finger to a fly. It took them a quare long time to find out the decent man he was, an' then they liked him better nor they liked their own da!"

"Och, indeed, you know, that often happens," his wife remarked. She glanced at the mantelshelf. "Dear save us," she exclaimed, "it's gettin' quaren late. That man of yours'll never be here the night, Martha!" She turned to her husband. "We'd better be goin', Henry, before it gets any later!"

" You'd better stay an' have your supper here," said Mrs. Martin. " You were sayin' a wee while ago you would like a drop of tay, an' now we're all here, we might as well have it as not ! "

Jamesey asked where his Aunt Esther was, and as he spoke, she came down the stairs wearing dry clothes.

" Here I am, Jamesey ! " she said, coming into the kitchen.

" Come on up to the fire here," he called to her, getting up from his chair and holding it forward for her. " We're just goin' to have our supper. Man, dear, do you hear that storm ? "

Esther did not take the chair which he offered to her. She went to the door and opened it, and as she did so the wind blew in and almost caused the oil-lamp to explode.

" Woman-a-dear ! " shouted Henry Mahaffy, " mind what you're doin' or you'll set the house alight on us afore ever we know where we are ! "

Esther hurriedly shut the door, and come to the fire. " It's rainin' bucketsful ! " she said.

Mrs. Martin prepared the supper, and presently they sat down to the meal. There was some constraint among them, for Esther and Jane Mahaffy still felt some of the anger they had displayed earlier in the evening, and Henry Mahaffy was not free from its influence. Jamesey and Aggie chattered, but they found that the others answered them with a " Yes " or a " No " or " You're mebbe right ! " or " Aye, dear-a-dear, that's true ! " and in a little while they too became silent. They ate the food, and now and then Mrs. Martin would put out her hand for a cup, and say, " You'll have some

more tay, will you not ?" and the cup would be handed to her with, "Thank you, I will have a wee drop !" and then silence would fall again.

Esther sat nervously at the table, breaking a piece of soda-farl into crumbs, and now and then sipping some of her tea. There were wild thoughts in Esther's mind, and treacherous thoughts, too.

She was thinking to herself, "He's coming back ! He's coming back !" just as she had thought when she had been upstairs changing from her wet garments into dry ones. She had waited for him all these years. She could admit that now to herself. All the time that she had been living with Martha there had been in her heart, securely hidden, a desire for James Martin's love again. Her thoughts flew about her mind like a ball that is beaten backwards and forwards continually. One moment she was saying to herself that she could never hurt Martha again, that she must go away and never return to Ballyreagh, and another moment she was saying that she would stay on and be indifferent to Martha's feelings. He was not Martha's man, really. He was her man. Martha had imagined that he was dead, and had seldom spoken of him all the time that he was away, but she had kept him constantly in her memory, and often in the night she had lain awake, wondering whether he was alive or dead.

His picture came into her mind easily. She saw him as a strong, rough man, with arms that could crush you and lips that pressed fiercely on yours. She remembered how she had lain in his arms in the dark nights in fields and on a hillside,

with the wind blowing warmly about them, and the sound of the sea coming to them softly from the distant shore. There was the time when Henry Mahaffy had passed them while they lay together at the Moat and they had buried their faces together so that he should not see them. . . . She could almost feel James's beard against her cheeks now. . . . Henry had seen them, but they had sworn that he was mistaken—and Martha had sworn, too, that James had not been outside the house all that evening. It was a strange thing for Martha to do, but then Martha was more proud than any other Mahaffy. Poor Martha! . . .

"Will you have a wee drop more tay, Esther?" Martha said to her across the table.

She came out of her reverie with a start. Martha was saying something to her. . . . Then she understood, and she smiled at her sister, and said, "No thank you, Martha. I've done!"

Her thoughts of James came back into her mind. She was conscious of the babble of talk that began to circulate again, and she heard Martha asking Henry to have some more tea, and saw him waving his hands in refusal. What fat hands Henry had! James's hands were not fat. . . . Henry was saying, "Ah, now, I've done rightly!" but Martha would not heed him. It was odd that Martha should seem so calm when at any moment James might step up to the door and enter the house. She did not appear to be concerned at all. . . . Oh, God, would he never come! Why couldn't they all get up from the table? Why did Martha press them to eat? . . . She was urging Henry now to eat more, although he had waved

his fat hands and wiped his beard and asserted that he had done rightly.

"Come on now," she was saying, and laughing as she said it, "an' don't be lettin' on to be polite, for sure I know well it's not two cups nor yet three would satisfy you, Henry. Is it, Jane?"

Then Jane answered, "Och, indeed you're right, Martha! He's the great boy for tay! . . ."

Why couldn't Henry and Jane go home? James had never liked them. What was Martha thinking of in having them there for his homecoming? . . . Would James think she had failed on it? Martha had said she was not so nice-looking as she had been, and upstairs just now she had examined her face in the mirror. She was older . . . of course, she was older . . . but she had not failed a great deal. Martha might only be saying that to vex her, not that it was like Martha to say things without meaning them. . . . It was wicked of her to be thinking bad things about James, the way she was when Martha had been so good to her. Martha *had* been good to her. There was not another woman in the world like Martha, so patient, so gentle and kind. . . . Oh, now, she must not think of James again . . . only! . . . She must go away. That was all! . . .

Henry had allowed himself to be persuaded to take another cup of tea, and he was passing his cup to Martha.

"Sure, tay's the national drink of Ireland," he was saying, "an' isn't it better to be drinkin' tay nor to be drinkin' beer the way they do over in Englan'!"

He always had some excuse for his greediness. He would eat you out of hearth and home. . . .

"Sure, they drink beer an' porter every day over there with their dinner. Women, too! They think nothin' over in that country of a woman drinkin' her glass of porter every day, an' the whole of the people lookin' at her doin' it. You wouldn't think that was a God-fearin' Christian country, would you?"

Of course, if she were to go away. . . . It would be hard to go away just when he has returned to them all. She had lived a long while now in this house with Martha. . . . Perhaps she could stay on, and just be friendly to James. Perhaps she could do that. There was no reason why she should not behave like a sister. . . . But if he were to ask her. . . . And surely he would want her again. He loved her when he went away. It was strange that he had not said "Good-bye" to her before he went off on that voyage, and that he had not looked up to the window of her room to see if she were waving to him . . . but perhaps he had had something on his mind. . . . Jane Mahaffy was talking now. What was she saying? Oh, something in reply to Henry. Something about the English. . . .

"Ah, well, God help them," she was saying, "sure everybody knows what the English is like. They can't talk their own language at all. There's not a one amongst them can say the letter aitch. That's the truth I'm tellin' you. Do you mind thon coastguard over at Groomsport, Henry? Thon man come from London or somewhere like that, an' he couldn't talk at all. I mind well the

way the fellows an' girls used to get him down on the shore, an' try an' make him say 'horse.' But could he say it? Not without near chokin' himself. ''Orse,' he would say, ''orse!' An' when we told him to say 'horse,' he had to give a gulp an' near swally himself, an' then he couldn't say it proper. He used to call thon woman Aggie McKeown, Haggie! She'd 'a' married him if it hadn't been for that!"

Always making fun of some one, Jane Mahaffy. God had no right to give any woman the bitter tongue He gave her. . . .

The conversation passed round and round, and her thoughts were so disturbed by the sound of it that she could no longer keep them together. She got up from the table and walked over to the seat in the window. . . .

"Well, if that's what drinkin' porter does for you," Henry said as he got up, "we're better without it in this place!"

"Ah, now," retorted Martha, "there's no harm in a drop of porter!"

If he were out in that rain and wind, Esther thought to herself, he would be cut to the bone.

"You're right there!" said Mrs. Mahaffy to Martha, "porter's not like tay that does be turnin' your inside the like of leather the same as the man showed us on the limelight views!"

It was not far from the station to the house, and mebbe he would be wearing a good coat. The sea would be rolling up the wall, and driving the boats into the harbour behind the breakwater. . . . Jamesey got up from the table and came and sat beside her.

"What are you thinkin', Aunt Esther?" he said.

She ran her fingers through his hair . . . just like his da's hair. . . .

"I'm thinkin' it's a wild night for a man to be out," she said quietly.

"Aye, it is. Are you glad my da's comin' home, Aunt Esther?"

"Aye, son dear! . . ."

There was a thump on the door and then another.

The talk stopped instantly, and they sat listening.

The knock came again; and Esther started to her feet.

"It's mebbe my da!" said Jamesey.

"Will I open the door, Martha?" said Esther.

Mrs. Martin stood up tremulously and pushed her chair away.

"No," she said, "I'll do it!"

She walked swiftly to the door and opened it.

"Mind the lamp," she said as she did so.

A dark bearded man, rough of aspect and surly of manner, stood outside. He looked dirty, and his clothes were old and torn. The wind almost blew her over as she stood there holding the door, but she still stood gazing at him. He looked at her uncertainly.

"Is that you, James?" she said.

"Aye, it is," the man replied.

She held out her hand to him, and as she did so the wind dashed the door out of her grip, and caused it to bang against the wall. The flame in the lamp gave a great lurch. . . .

"Come on in," she said, drawing him into the kitchen, and shutting the door. "You must be in need of your tay!"

CHAPTER IX

ESTHER stood in the shadow of the window-seat and gazed at him. She clutched at the curtains with one hand, while with the other she nervously caught at her skirt. She stood thus while he slouched suspiciously into the centre of the kitchen. The light of the lamp dazzled him for a few moments and his eyes blinked as he peered about him. He held a cloth cap in his hand, and he was twisting it as if he were a culprit detected in a crime by one who is his social superior. His hair was long and untidy, and some of its strands hung over his forehead almost to his eyebrows. He had the look of a man who has not washed himself for many days, and there was something sly in his manner that repelled her. The man who had been her lover had walked alertly and had held his head high; his look had been quick and keen, and his words came out of his mouth like the rattle of a gun; but this man. . . . Her lips trembled and her eyes filled with tears. She held out her hand to him, and said, "Oh, James!"

There was a sulky scowl on his face as he glanced at her, and it went through her mind suddenly that if the man she had loved had scowled, his scowl would have been that of a strong man, not that of a feckless fellow who sulks rather than

rages. He did not take her hand, but turned towards the table and sat down heavily in one of the chairs.

"What are you Oh, Jamesin' about?" he said, and then they were certain that he was who he said he was, for that had been a retort he had often made before. He spoke to his wife. "Give us somethin' to ate for the love of God!" he exclaimed. "I haven't had a bite the day, an' I'm near famished!"

"You've not had! . . ."

She did not say any more, but hurried to the table, and began to pour out tea for him. The others stood in silence and watched him as he stretched out his hand to take the cup from her.

"Here," she said quietly, "take that! There's plenty for you!"

He drank the tea at one gulp, and then passed the cup for more, and while it was being filled, he seized a piece of bread and began to eat it like a hungry animal. He swallowed great lumps of the loaf almost whole, and drank his tea with a long, loud, sucking sound. There was something strange and inhuman about him, something starved and ravenous and brutal and like a wild beast. It was as if a dog that had known a comfortable home had been astray for a long time and had lost the sense of discipline and had become a fierce and desperate cur. His conduct alarmed his family as they stood silently looking at him; and some movement among them caused him to glance up at them sharply.

"What are you all gapin' at?" he shouted at them angrily.

" They're all glad to see you back again, James," Mrs. Martin said to him.

He disregarded her statement, and turned away from his audience. " Gimme some more to ate ! " he demanded.

Jamesey went over to his father's side, and took his hand. " I'm right an' glad to see you, da ! " he said eagerly.

His father pushed him roughly aside. " What the hell's the matter with you all ? " he said, filling his mouth with a soda-farl.

The boy fell back to the group at the end of the room. He had made an angry movement towards his father when he heard him speak in that way, but his mother touched him on the arm, and his anger subsided.

" He's tired, can't you see, an' starvin' ! Don't be sayin' a word to him any of you til he's had his food an' a rest. You look tired, James," she said, turning to her husband.

He mumbled thickly, for his mouth was full of food.

" Well, just go on atin' til you're satisfied," she continued, " an' no one'll bother you at all til you've done ! " She put more food on his plate, and filled his cup, and when she had done that she moved towards the others. " Sit down the whole of yous," she said, " for dear sake ! Esther, come over here to the fire ! "

Her husband looked up from his food as she spoke.

" Is that Esther ? " he said, pointing to her.

There was some hardness in Mrs. Martin's voice when she answered his question. He had not asked after anyone else.

"Aye, it is!" she replied.

"She's quarely changed," he said, glancing at Esther casually, and then he turned again to his plate. "I didn't know her at first," he continued. "I thought mebbe it was you or Jane Mahaffy!"

Mrs. Mahaffy sat up in her chair and stiffened. "Indeed, then, an' you'd little call to be mistakin' her for me, James Martin, if it's James Martin you are! . . ."

He laughed at her. "You're right there, Jane," he said. "You are in sang. You're skinnier nor she is, an' you always were!" He looked again at Esther. "All the same, Esther, you're failed on it. I mind rightly the time you were a fine-lookin' woman that a man could take a bit of pleasure out of, but there's not much in you now by the look of you, I'm thinkin'!"

Esther did not answer. She stood with her head leaning against the mantelshelf as if she were musing over the fire. She did not appear to be perturbed, nor did she make any answer to James Martin's remarks, but in her mind some jeering thing continually said, "An' that's the man you waited for! An' that's the man you waited for!"

"Are you married yet?" he said to her, turning away from the table.

She did not reply immediately, and Jane Mahaffy thought that she had not heard. She pulled Esther's skirt, and said, "He's speakin' to you!"

"No, I'm not," Esther answered.

He turned indifferently from her. "Well, you'll need to hurry up if you want a man," he said, fumbling in his pockets, "for you're not gettin' no younger, an' you're not gettin' nicer-lookin'

on it. Has any of you got a cigarette or a pipe of tobacco or anything ? I'm dyin' for a smoke ! "

Henry Mahaffy passed his pouch to him, and he began to fill the pipe he had taken from his pocket.

" I'm often sayin' that to her," declared Jane Mahaffy. " It's time you were married an' settled down, I tell her, but dear bless you, she doesn't pay a bit of heed to me. Do you, Esther ? "

" No," Esther replied, as she walked away from the fire. She went and sat down close to Jamesey, but she did not look at him or speak to him. She had been calm as she stood at the fire, but her spirit was breaking. She felt that she must sit in the shadow somewhere and cry, but she could not bear to cry in the presence of James Martin or of Jane Mahaffy. While she sat upright in her chair as if she were afraid to relax her body, Jamesey slipped his hand into hers. " I love you, Aunt Esther," he whispered, and then she could bear no more.

" I'm not feelin' very well, Martha ! " she said. " I'll go upstairs an' lie down a wee while ! "

Martha looked at her, and nodded her head. " Aye, do, Esther ! " she answered.

" You're never sick, are you, Esther ? " exclaimed Jane Mahaffy.

" Be quiet, Jane ! " said Mrs. Martin. " You have too much talk altogether ! "

" Good-night, Aunt Esther ! " said Jamesey. " Will I come an' light the candle for you ? "

" No thank you, Jamesey son," Esther replied. " I'll do it myself. Good-night, Jamesey. Good-night to you all ! "

She walked up the stairs, and then they heard

the noise of her bedroom door as it slammed to.

"Have you finished your supper, James?" Mrs. Martin asked of her husband. He wagged his head. "Then I'll clear the table away, an' we can all sit roun' the fire. Jamesey, son, lend me a hand with the table, will you?"

"Aye, ma!"

The table was pushed back into its place, and Mrs. Martin and her son cleared the dishes from it. James Martin pulled his chair closer to the fire, and sat for a few moments drawing smoke from his pipe, and puffing it in thick clouds from his mouth.

"Well, Henry," he said to his brother-in-law, "you're fatter on it nor you were when I last saw you!" His eye fell on Aggie as he spoke. "Is that your daughter?" he said.

Aggie burst out laughing. "No, da, I'm not!" she said, and then could say no more, so tickled was she by her father's mistake.

He took the pipe out of his mouth, and gazed at her in astonishment. He half rose from his chair, and then sat down again.

"*Da*, did you call me?" he said.

"Aye, indeed I did," answered Aggie.

He turned to Mrs. Martin. "Do you mean to tell me I've got a daughter as well as a son?" he said.

Mrs. Martin nodded. "She was born a wee while after you went away," she replied.

Aggie smiled at him, and said, "I'm a wee bit of a surprise for you, amn't I, da?"

"An' the fine wee girl she is, too!" Henry

Mahaffy exclaimed, patting her on the back, "the way she helps her ma in the shop!"

"What shop?" said Martin.

"Her shop," answered Henry Mahaffy, pointing to his sister. "She started a delph-shop after you went away . . . an' that just reminds me, mebbe you'll tell us where you've been all this time!"

James Martin did not respond to his brother-in-law's invitation to relate the story of his adventures. He sat still in his chair for a few moments, looking at his daughter as if he could not take his eyes off her. Then he held out his hand to her, and when she had taken it, he drew her towards him. "Come here, daughter," he said, "til I talk to you!"

"You weren't expectin' the like of me, were you, da?" said Aggie, as she sat down on his knee, and leant against his shoulder.

"I was not, indeed!" He put his arm round her and hugged her tightly, and then drew her face down to his and kissed her.

"It's the quare thing," he said, "for me to be havin' a handsome girl for a daughter, an' me not knowin' nothin' about it. You're the quare fine-lookin' wee girl, Aggie!"

Aggie laughed joyfully. "I'm glad you like me, da!" she exclaimed.

Mrs. Martin came and sat down beside them. "Now, don't be fillin' her head with conceit," she said, "for sure she's got enough of that already!"

He disregarded what she said. "It's the rare woman you'll make," he said to Aggie, pressing his face against hers. "Boys-a-boys, but you've

got the quare, soft hair!" He turned to his wife. "She's better lookin' nor ever Esther was at her age!"

"Am I, da?" said Aggie. "My Aunt Esther was quare an' nice-lookin' when she was young!"

"Aye, an' she's nice-lookin' still," Jamesey added.

"You're nicer lookin' nor her, Aggie!" said James Martin.

He kissed Aggie, and then put her from him.

"You're the right wee girl," he said, rising and stretching himself. "Holy Jases," he said, "isn't it fine to be under a good roof again. Do you hear that wind out there?"

They listened to the storm which had not abated.

"Many a time I was out in the like of that," he continued.

"Da!" Aggie exclaimed miserably.

"Aye, many's the time," he added.

They did not speak for they thought that he would now tell them of his adventures and the cause of his absence from home; but he did not do so. He gaped about him sleepily, and then said to his wife, "Where am I to sleep the night?"

She opened the door of the bedroom that led off the kitchen. "You'll find all you want in there!" she said.

"Aye," he said, and yawned. "Well, I'll not be keepin' you up any longer, Henry and Jane! It's a wild night, an' you'll be wantin' to get to your bed, an' it's where I'm wantin' to go myself, the tired I am."

Henry Mahaffy made a gesture of dissent. "Ah, sure, we're in no hurry," he said. "It's Sunday

the morrow, an' we've no work to get up to. Just sit down quietly now, an' tell us a bit about yourself, an' all you've been doin' this long while. Sure, we all thought you were drowned or somethin'. There was a story went about that you were lost at sea!"

"Aye, Uncle Henry," exclaimed Jamesey maliciously, "an' there was another story went about that he was captured by cannibals an' kept a prisoner in the heart of Africa, an' it was your own self put it about. Da," he added, turning to his father, "he writ to the ould Queen about you. He did in sang!"

Henry Mahaffy flushed, and moved uncomfortably in his chair. "Now, now, Jamesey," he said, "don't go an' be rakin' all that up again!"

"He wanted her to send a man-o'-war to rescue you from the darkies. Aye, da, he did in sang. It was the quare cod, that!"

"Well, sure, he might have been captured by them," said Henry Mahaffy, "just as easy as be drowned. There's plenty of people does be captured by them!"

James Martin turned towards the room in which he was to sleep. "I'm too tired to talk the night," he said, as he went into the room, and shut the door behind him.

Henry Mahaffy was too astonished to say anything for awhile. Then he got up from his seat, and put on his hat.

"Come on, Jane, woman!" he said, shortly, and his wife rose too and prepared for the street. "I hope," he continued, addressing himself to Martha, "you'll have joy in your man's return,

Martha, but I must say he's not so civil in his manner as he might be ! "

" Aye, that's true, Henry," his wife added. " It's a quare thing for a man to walk into a house that he's not put his foot in for sixteen years, an' then him to walk off to his bed without a word of explanation to his friends. It's not like the thing, so it's not. It's enough to make any person think bad things of him ! "

Mrs. Martin helped her sister-in-law into her jacket. " Now, Jane, don't you know rightly that a tired man does not like to be talkin', an' couldn't you see that James was wore out. God knows what trouble he's had to bear ! . . ."

" It's awful," interrupted Aggie, " to think of him out in the storms the way he said he was ! "

" Well, what call had he to be out in the storms when his home was here," said Jamesey, screwing his face in the way of a man who is puzzled.

" Aye, that's an important question, Jamesey ! " said Henry Mahaffy, getting ready to go out. " That's a very important question. What was he doin' all these years. We've a right to know, the whole of us." He opened the door as he spoke, and his wife passed out into the rain and wind. He stood holding it open, heedless of the gale that blew in. " I'll be round again the morrow's morn to hear what he has to say for himself. Good-night to you all ! "

He closed the door behind him, and the quiet in the kitchen, which had been disturbed by the inrush of storm, was restored.

Jamesey and Aggie sat in opposite corners of the fire. The turf was burning down, and the

red embers were turning to grey ashes. A thin film of light jumped in and out of a corner of the fire, sending a long, jumpy shadow round the room. Now and then rain-drops fell down the chimney on to the hot turf, and made a little sizzling sound for a moment.

"Well, childer," said Mrs. Martin, "your da's home again!"

"Aye," said Jamesey shortly.

"Are you glad to see him, son?"

"Aye, I'm glad enough. I didn't like the way he spoke to my Aunt Esther, an' he didn't hardly take any notice of me at all. He's a quare sort of a man! . . ."

"I'm glad he's back!" Aggie interrupted. "He took a fancy to me the minute he clapped his eyes on me. Didn't he, ma?"

Mrs. Martin smiled at her daughter, and stroked her cheek. "He did, daughter," she said, "an' why wouldn't he, an' him your da!"

"I wonder where he was all this time," said Jamesey, as he took off his boots. He had drawn the lace of one of them and was about to take the boot off his foot, when his mind suddenly filled with suspicion. "Ma!" he demanded, "do you know where he was?"

"No, son, I don't no more than the dead!"

"I wonder . . . Ma, did he run away from you?"

Aggie bent over and struck him on the hand. "You shouldn't speak that way of your da, Jamesey," she said. "As if my da would do such an a thing!"

He shook off his boots, and then put on a pair

of carpet slippers. "It's brave an' early yet," he said. "I'll put a bit more turf on the fire, ma!"

"Aye, son, do."

"He's not what I thought he'd be like!" he said, as he flung a piece of turf on the fire.

"What did you think he'd be like, son?"

"Ah, different! Not like what he is. He doesn't look like a man would be married to you.... I don't know how to say it, ma . . . he looks like a man walkin' the roads!"

"I can't bear to hear you talkin' that way, Jamesey," exclaimed Aggie angrily. "He's a quare nice da, that's what he is, an' I do believe you're put out because he didn't take as much notice of you as he did of me."

"Ah, for dear sake!" said Jamesey in contempt.

"Wheesht, child-a-dear," Mrs. Martin said. "Don't be talkin' too loud or you'll disturb his sleep!"

The turf burned up brightly, and gave out the faint beautiful smell that clings about the houses where turf is burnt. Mrs. Martin drew her children closer to her, and they all sat in the red glow in silence. The window rattled in the rain and wind, but the noise did not disturb them: they were so secure inside that the storm only served to make them feel more peaceful.

"It's a wild night for sailors," said Jamesey.

"Aye," said Mrs. Martin.

"I'm glad my da's in his bed an' not in a boat," said Aggie.

While they sat there they became aware of

footsteps overhead. Jamesey sat up stiffly and listened.

"That must be my Aunt Esther," he said. "I thought she went to her bed long ago!"

"She went on quarely when my da spoke to her," Aggie murmured without raising herself from her position against her mother's side.

"I think I'll go up to her for a wee minute," said Mrs. Martin, "she'll mebbe be wantin' me!"

She made Aggie move, and the girl resented having to do so.

"Och, sure, she doesn't need you," she said crossly.

"Mebbe, she does, daughter, an' sure if she doesn't I can come down again. You an' Jamesey can sit here an' talk a while about your da!"

She went upstairs and entered the room where Esther was.

CHAPTER X

When Esther had climbed the stairs to her room, she had done so to escape from the presence of the others. She was not tired or sleepy. She was disturbed in her mind. The jeering thing still mocked her with its exultant, "An' that's the man you waited for! An' that's the man you waited for!" She had seen the astonishment with which the others had watched James ravenously consume his food, and had heard Henry Mahaffy murmur, "Dear-a-dear!" and "Boys-a-boys!" and make a clucking sound with his tongue against his palate, and had felt, too, that Aggie was rejoicing in her father, while Jamesey was full of wonder; but these things were like flashes of thought across one big thought. He had ignored her. He had treated her in a rough way, and had spoken slightingly of her. He had told her that she must hurry up and get a man before it was too late. . . . "An' that's the man you waited for!" said the jeering thing. She had let bad thoughts come into her mind when she had heard that he was returning to his home, and had allowed herself to imagine him holding her in his arms. . . . she had determined to act shamefully to Martha if James wanted her, and it had never entered her mind that he would

not want her. She saw now quite clearly that all the time that James was away she had had thoughts that were treacherous to Martha. She had lived on in the hope that he would return, and she should again be his lover and lie in his arms in warm, grassy places where they could hear the sound of the sea mingling with the sound of the wind. Even now, she felt that her remorse was not remorse at all, that it was born of wounded desire, that there would not have been any remorse had James taken her to him as she had hoped he would. The love she had for Jamesey was a reflection of the love she had had for his father. . . .

That was the bitter thing that she had to know of herself, and well was she repaid for her badness, she told herself, when her mind had been lit up and she had learned the truth. He had returned, and he did not care for her. He had returned like a tramp off the roads, a rag of a man, a blurred picture of himself, but although he was not to be compared with the man who had gone away sixteen years earlier, he treated her as if she were dirt. That was it. Dirt beneath his feet! Had she met such a man on the road, she would have passed him by without a word of greeting; yet this man had no regard for her, though she had wasted her life in regard for him.

She was sitting at the window when Martha came into the room. She leant against the sill, and her head rested on the palm of her hand so that Martha could just see her face.

"Is that you, Martha?" she said, as Mrs. Martin came across the floor to her.

"Aye, Esther," Mrs. Martin replied. "I just come up to see how you were!"

"I'm rightly, thank you! It's a terrible wild night!"

"Aye!"

"I wouldn't wonder but a ship would be wrecked the night!"

"Ah, God help all out there!"

She sat down beside her sister, and they both looked out of the window at the sea, which was a big dark shape that frequently broke up into little white rifts far out, and great, roaring white waves near to. There was no moon in the sky, and the stars had hidden themselves in the folds of the clouds. Boats went by with shaky lights, and sometimes a horn hooted. A white light shone from the lighthouse, and caught the Copeland Islands in its glow. The dark mass of sky and sea was sometimes lit by a revolving light from the lighthouse at Black Head, and further away a flash came at intervals from the other side of the Irish Sea.

"God be good to any poor woman has her man out there the night," said Mrs. Martin.

She looked at Esther, and saw that her eyes were hard and dry, but that now and then her eyelids closed quickly and remained shut for a moment or two as if she were trying to keep her tears in. And while she looked at her, a tear escaped from its prison, and trembled on her lashes and then it fell on to the hand that lay in her lap. She bent forward and took Esther's hand, and held it firmly in hers, but she did not speak. A lost bird cried out as it flew past the house, and

then the wind, gathering itself up like a runner who sees the goal a little way off, flung itself in a great rage on the land, and the sea rose to the height of a hill and made a terrible shout as it fell over on the rocks, and roared through the seaweed and smashed itself finally on the sea-wall. A sick cow moaned plaintively in its byre near at hand, and a frightened dog barked miserably.

"You better come to bed, Esther," said Mrs. Martin, trying to draw her sister from the window.

Then Esther cried. Her eyes brimmed over, and her lips trembled. A moan came from her, and the tears tumbled down her cheeks like rain.

"Poor Esther," said Mrs. Martin, drawing her into her arms, and fondling her.

They stood there in the darkness, and Esther sobbed until it seemed that she must die of sobbing; and Mrs. Martin clapped her shoulder, and murmured some comforting thing to her.

"I didn't mean to cry," Esther said when she had recovered from the violence of her grief, "but I couldn't help it."

Mrs. Martin rubbed her face against Esther's hair, and murmured, "I know, dear, I know!"

"He's . . . he's that different," Esther continued.

"He *is* changed, isn't he?"

"Aye. He's not like the same man. I couldn't 'a' believed it if I hadn't seen him with my own eyes. An' he's that hard. You heard the way he spoke to me?"

"He was always hard, Esther!"

"An' makin' little of me afore Henry an' Jane. She was right an' pleased to hear him at it,

Eggin' him on, she was. . . . An' then comparin' me with Aggie!"

"You see, it's young ones he likes, Esther!"

"I'm not that ould, am I? Martha, am I failed on it? It's not right to be askin' you, but am I altered the way he says I am?"

Mrs. Martin took hold of her sister's face, and held it as if she were examining it critically. "You're not like what you were, Esther!" she said.

"But amn't I nice-lookin' still, the way I was one time?"

"You're not bad. . . ."

But Esther would not be consoled. "Then I am failed on it," she exclaimed bitterly. "It's true what he says, that I'm ould an' ugly!"

"You're not ugly, Esther, but. . . ."

"I was a quare nice-lookin' girl one time, Martha!"

"You were, Esther. You were, indeed! But sure we all get on in years. You had your time of lookin' nice. I never had any time!"

"He married you for all that. An' you're nice enough lookin' now. He said that himself. . . ."

"Don't be botherin' your head about him, Esther!'

"I don't want to bother my head about him," Esther replied, "but it's not nice to sit there an' hear him makin' little of me, an' callin' me ould. . . ." She stopped for a moment, and then speaking more rapidly, went on. "Martha," she continued, "I've got a quare feelin' about him. I don't hardly know how to tell you, but it's like as if I'd been expectin' some one a long time, an' a knock

come to the door, an' I thought it was him, but when I opened the door it was some one else. That's the way I feel, an' I'm heartsore feelin' it ! "

For a few moments Mrs. Martin felt a quick, hard anger. Esther was confessing that she had imagined James returning as her lover, had, indeed, been living in the hope that some day he would so return, and she was confessing her disappointment that he had returned indifferent to her. It seemed to her to be a miserably mean thing to have nursed this hope in her heart all these sixteen years when its realization must mean renewed sorrow for her sister ; but some great knowledgeable thing in her made her realize the piteousness of her sister's position, and perhaps the fact that Esther's desires had been blasted helped her to forgive the treachery that had been intended.

" There's many a woman," she said quietly, " has to endure what you're endurin', an' many a man, too ! It's a pity to fill your mind with one thing, Esther. As likely as not it'll fail you in the end. James is not as young as he was, any more nor you are, an' it may be his heart's changed. Did you see the pleasure he had in Aggie when he heard she was his daughter ? " It was a quare look was on his face when she went over til him an' called him ' da.' Mebbe he'll be settlin' down now, an' livin' quiet an' dacent, an' thinking of his childer growin' up to be a comfort to him when he's an ould crippled man, mebbe ! Sure, that's natural, Esther. He's been wanderin' the world, an' he's likely tired, an' just wants to sit down an' rest himself ! "

"Mebbe so!"

"It wasn't kind to me, Esther, to be thinkin' about him the way you were all that time!"

"No, it wasn't!"

"An' you with the memories you had of things you done to me. It's a mercy to God there wasn't a bastard to be rearin' for him!"

"You're mebbe right."

"Surely I'm right, amn't I?"

"I don't know. I'd 'a' been havin' something, an' now I have nothin'!"

"There's that of course. . . ."

They remained silent for some while, except when Esther could not prevent a sob from escaping. The room was cold, and Mrs. Martin felt chill in her hands and limbs.

"You'd better get into your bed, Esther!" she said.

Esther did not make a movement. "Come on, Esther!" Mrs. Martin repeated.

"I'd be better away, Martha!" Esther replied, turning away from her sister, "for I can't be happy here again. I could mebbe go up to Belfast an' get work in a wareroom or start a shop the way you did yourself, an' not be stoppin' here to be a torment to all!"

"That's as you please, Esther. You're welcome here, an' well you know it. There's no fear now of trouble or that, but mebbe it'll hurt you to stay here an' know he doesn't care for you no more. It hurt me when I found it out. . . . I suppose you never thought of that . . . but I'm well tholed to it now, an' I mind it no more nor the wind in my face of a rough day. I'm knowin'

rightly he feels no more for me nor a cat feels for you, an' I'm not carin', Esther. I thought when I got his letter mebbe I might care, but when I saw him come in the house, lookin' like he was, an' I minded everything, I just didn't bother my head about him. I'm glad enough to have him back, an' for him to be sittin' in the dusk, mebbe, smokin' his pipe an' not talkin', an' me sittin' with him. You'll think that's quare, an' me not carin' for him no more, but it's the way I feel. Many's a time I was envyin' the poor women comin' into the shop of a Saturday night with their men an' their childer, an' them with hardly no money at all, but just all together! An' them thinkin' me the proud woman with gallons of gold because I would have little to do with them. Me envyin' them all the time! . . . I'd liefer 'a' been married on a laborin' man, an' him drunk every Saturday night, nor be me in my shop with pounds saved in the bank, an' James not at home. Do you know what I mean, Esther? Just to feel you have a man too!"

"It's not just wantin' a man I am," Esther replied, "for I could 'a' had plently. Jimmy Murray over at Millisle would 'a' give the eyes out of his head for me. . . ."

"Aye, indeed he would, Esther!"

"But I wouldn't have him, an' Andra Montgomery had a fancy for me one time, but I didn't fancy him. I only fancied one man, an' it didn't matter to me what sort of a man he was, good or bad, for I loved him all ways he was, an' done whatever he wanted me to do, an' I didn't care for no one or what they said, only just to be lovin' him an' be loved by him. An' I had that in my

heart all the time like a big hunger or a drouth, an' now ! . . . It's better, I'm thinkin', to be hungry an' dry all your life, nor to see food an' drink, an' not get it."

" Or not want it, Esther ! "

" Aye, or not want it. That's the way of it then, Martha, an' you see, don't you, I can't be stoppin' here no more ? It'll never be the same in this house again ! "

" That's true enough."

" I'll mebbe thinkin' of somethin' in a wee while. . . . If I was to start a shop in Belfast, the way you done here, Jamesey could come an' lodge with me. . . . Will I draw the blind ? "

Mrs. Martin nodded her head. " It'll keep the sight of the storm out," she said.

Esther drew the blind down, and then went and sat on her bed. " It's quare," she said, " for me to be talkin' this way to you, an' me your man's fancy woman one time ! "

" There's many a quare thing in the world, Esther. Will you not get into your bed now ? It's late, an' you'll be tired out the mornin' ! "

" I'm not in the way of sleepin'," said Esther.

Mrs. Martin went over to her and unfastened her blouse. " Well, go to bed anyway," she said. " You'll be better lyin' there snug an' warm an' restin' yourself, nor to be sittin' up tirin' yourself out, an' you gettin' colder every minute. Lift up your arms, will you ? "

She took Esther's blouse off and unfastened her skirt so that it slipped down about her heels. Then she lit the candle, and set it on the wooden toilet-table in the corner." I'll plait your hair for

you," she said, "the way I used to do when you were a wee girl!"

"Ah, don't trouble yourself, Martha! . . ."

"Sure, what trouble is it? I've a fancy to do it!"

She took the pins out of her sister's hair, and then shook the coils out so that they fell into a dark mass on her back.

"You were always proud of your hair," she said, as she began to brush it, "but it was never as nice as mine, Esther. You excelled me in everything else but that!"

Esther nodded her head. "You always had lovely hair, Martha," she said.

They gossiped trivially while Mrs. Martin dressed her sister's hair, and then they sat still for a little while. Mrs. Martin held the brush in her lap and sat staring into the candle-light and Esther stretched herself on the bed. They did not speak, though Esther wished to do so. She put her linked arms under her head as a pillow and raised herself so that she might look at Martha, and once she opened her lips to say something, and then she closed them again without saying it. Mrs. Martin shivered slightly and stood up.

"It's gettin' quaren cold in here," she said, putting the hair-brush down. "Come on, Esther, and get into bed!"

She unfastened Esther's petticoat, and took off her corsets. "You would think you were a child, the way I'm goin' on!" she said, smiling as she spoke.

When Esther was undressed, and had put on her night-gown, Mrs. Martin pulled the bedclothes

down so that she could get into the bed. Esther climbed on to the bed, and then suddenly put her arms round her sister's neck, and hugged her tightly.

"I've been a bad sister to you, Martha," she said, "but I'll never be bad again. I declare to God I won't. I. . . ."

Mrs. Martin forced her into the bed, and happed the clothes about her. "Are you warm?" she said.

Esther nodded her head.

"Don't be worryin' about anythin', Esther!" Mrs. Martin said, bending over her, and kissing her. "Sleep well, dear! Good-night!"

"Good-night, Martha!"

Mrs. Martin took the candle and walked towards the door of the room. She had turned the handle of the door, and was about to leave the room when Esther called to her so quietly that she might easily not have been heard.

"Martha!" she said.

"Yes, Esther?"

"Are—are you sleepin' in your own room the night?"

"Yes, Esther. Where else would I sleep?"

"Aye, of course! Good-night, Martha!"

"Good-night, Esther!"

She went downstairs and found her son and daughter still chattering by the fire.

"Away to your beds the pair of you," she said playfully. "Have you barred the door, Jamesey?"

"No, ma! . . ."

"Well, never mind. I'll do it. Away the pair of you!"

She kissed Aggie and sent her off to bed. Jamesey had started barring the door, and securing the house, and she allowed him to finish doing so. While he did it she sat down before the fire and waited. He came to her side when he had finished and bent over her and kissed her. She caught hold of his arm and drew him down so that he knelt at her side. "Son, dear," she said, and held him close to her.

"Are you not happy, ma?" he asked when he could speak to her.

"Ochone, son, what an a question to be askin'. Haven't I got good call to be happy with you an' Aggie an' all! . . ."

"I was meanin' about my da, ma!"

"An' him too! It's a quare woman wouldn't be glad to see her man back again! What put that thought in your head, Jamesey?"

"I don't know, ma! I can't understand him. . . . Ma, did he run away from you?"

"Son-a-dear," she said, putting him away from her, "you're not near yourself to be askin' the like of that question. Away to your bed, now, an' be gettin' up early in the mornin'!"

She kissed him again, and he got up from his knees and stood irresolutely near her.

"Away now, son! . . ."

He looked at her steadily as if he would surprise her into revealing the truth, but she returned his look with equal steadiness. "You were a wee tory when you were a child," she said, smiling at him, "an' now you're a big tory when you're a man. Good-night, son!"

"Good-night, ma!" he said, and went to bed.

She heard him shut the door of his room, but she did not move towards her own room in which her husband lay. She still sat before the fire and watched the turf burn down. The gale continued unabated, but she did not appear to hear the waves slapping each other with loud smacks, nor the wind raging round the corners of the cottage. Once she got up from her chair and went to the door of the bedroom and listened. She heard his breath coming heavily. Then she returned to her chair and sat in quietness. The flame in the fire had died down, and the glow was dying out. She put her foot on the hulk of turf, and it crumpled into ashes. A cold air came into the room as it did so, and she shivered again as she had shivered in Esther's room. She began to feel very lonely, and, half-affrighted, she glanced round the kitchen, peering fearfully into the shadows. The oil-lamp flickered, and she saw that the oil had burned low. She turned up the wick, but in a few seconds the light burned out again. She waited for a moment or two, and then she blew the light out, and went to bed. . . .

In the night she woke and sat up in her bed. She remembered quickly all that had happened in the daytime, and she turned to look at the man sleeping at her side. The storm had subsided, and the moon shone through the heavy clouds so clearly that she could see James's face. The window was open, and the wind, turned gentle, blew the lace curtains slightly. She could hear the surge rolling up and breaking and then rolling back again. She saw James very plainly. Her eyes were open, and her mind was free from illu-

sion. There he lay, a shaggy, rough, brutal-looking man, with a heavy, protruding jaw that weighed his lower lip down so that his mouth was open. He was breathing heavily, and now and then he gathered his breath into a great snort. She saw that his flesh was loose and flabby. His night shirt was open at the neck, displaying the rolls of puffy fat about his throat. His nose had thickened since she last saw him, and the flesh about his eyes was puckered and slack. He was a great gross thing that had once been strong and alert. There was a bestial look about him. . . . She understood some of Esther's disappointment. . . .

While she sat up in bed and watched him he snorted suddenly, and then, shutting his mouth tightly, turned over on his side away from her; and as he turned, he pulled the bedclothes from her. She tried to pull them gently back again, but in turning he had tightened them round him, and she could not release them without disturbing him. She sat huddled up in the bed for a while, and then she climbed out of it and stood indecisively on the floor. She realized suddenly that she was staring into the looking-glass which reflected a tired, worn face. . . . Then she remembered a tale that had been told to her when she was a child. She must not look into the mirror at night, lest the devil should grin at her out of it, because of her vanity. . . . She had forgotten that story until that moment, but now she remembered how it had frightened her when she was a little girl; and she caught a vision of herself creeping to bed in the dark, not daring to look towards the table

where the looking-glass stood for fear the Evil One should laugh at her, while flames emitted from his mouth and eyes. She had had to shut her eyes very closely together as she crept past the table, and always she had climbed into bed in a panic and had slid under the clothes with her eyes shut.

"What a thing to be tellin' a child!" she murmured to herself.

It was odd that she should remember that tale to-night, and odder still that she should have been gazing into the mirror without knowing at first that she was doing so. She laughed a little when she saw her husband's reflection in it. . . . Then she gathered up her clothes and carried them into the kitchen. She shut the room door behind her very quietly, and when she had done so, she went up the stairs to the room where Esther lay.

"Who's that?" demanded Esther, starting up in alarm.

"It's all right, Essie, dear!" she answered. "It's me!"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothin's wrong," she said. "I'm comin' in by the side of you. I couldn't bear to stay with him any longer!"

She got into the bed and lay down beside Esther. They lay with their backs touching, and did not speak, though neither of them slept.

"Are you asleep, Martha?" said Esther at last.

"Not yet, Esther!"

"Turn round, will you. . . ."

They turned towards each other, and Esther

crept into her sister's arms and lay as a child lies on its mother's breast.

"It's quare him to be home again," she said.

"Aye, it is!"

"He's quarely changed."

"Aye!"

Esther looked at her for a moment, but she could not see her face very clearly. They were very quiet, and it seemed to Esther that her sister had fallen asleep. Her eyes were shut, and her breath came regularly. But Mrs. Martin did not sleep that night, though she made no movement to show that she was awake when Esther wriggled out of her arms and turned away to sleep.

"Aye, he's changed quarely," she said to herself, and composed herself to wait for the morning.

CHAPTER XI

He preferred to take his breakfast in bed on Sunday morning, and for that she was thankful. There was confusion in her mind. She had longed for his return, but now that he was at home again she was uncertain of the strength of her desire. The odd feeling of disgust which had come upon her in the night, and compelled her to leave his bed, still held her. It seemed to her to be indecent that she should lie with a man whom she had not seen for sixteen years, and of whose life in that time she knew nothing. There ought to have been another period of wooing, a fresh time of courtship, a new marriage . . . and he had not even kissed her. When she had climbed into the bed beside him, he had grunted in his sleep. She wondered whether he knew she had lain beside him. . . .

Where had he been all this time ? She had not speculated on that question when he was away from home, for all her desire was that he should return ; but now the questions thrust themselves up in her mind, and shouted out for answers. What had he been doing since he left her ? How had he managed to change himself into this loose-looking lump of a man ? She remembered again the incident of the drunken sailor who had babbled about his wife in Charlestown. . . . She might not

be the only woman. There might be many more. There might be children. . . . How could she account for his long absence from home? Jamesey's mind was full of suspicion, and Henry Mahaffy and his wife would be in the house presently demanding explanations. . . . And, then, Esther! . .

"I'd best be tellin' the truth to them!" she said to herself.

She went to the door of the bedroom where her husband lay, and knocked on it. It struck her that it was an odd thing for a woman to knock at the door of her own bedroom because her husband lay in it. She had never done anything like that in the days before he went away. That showed. . . .

He grunted at her as she entered the room

"It's you, is it?" he said, stretching himself, and yawning so that she could see into a monstrous throat. "Where's the paper?"

"Paper!" she exclaimed.

"Aye, the newspaper!"

She laughed. "Don't you know it's Sunday?" she said. "There's no papers in this country on a Sunday whatever there is in America. You can have the *Saturday Night* that Jamesey brought down with him from Belfast yesterday!"

"It's a quare sort of a country doesn't have papers on a Sunday," he said.

Some strain of Ulster Sabbatarianism stirred in her as she listened to him.

"It's a quare sort of a country that does have papers on God's day," she retorted. "I suppose you're goin' to lie on to dinner-time? Jamesey an' Aggie's away to church this long time, an' it

would mebbe 'a' done you good to go along with them ! "

" I've no use for churches," he replied. " Is there nothin' to read ? "

" There's the *Saturday Night !* . . ."

" A lot of ould futball ! " he said, interrupting her.

" Well, if that'll not content you, there's the Horner's Penny Stories that Aggie reads, an' if you don't want that, there's the Bible and the Foxe's Book of Martyrs ! "

" Och, for Jase' sake ! " he said in disgust, " I'm not a child goin' to the Sabbath-school. You can go out of this now, an' leave me to get a bit more sleep if you have nothin' dacent in the house to read ! "

She sat down on the edge of the bed, with her back to the foot of it, so that she could look into his face.

" James," she said, " have you thought of what you're goin' to tell the childer and every one ? "

" Tell the childer what ? " he demanded, with his head partly under the bedclothes.

" About you. They thought you were drowned, an' I never told them you left me ! They'll think it quare you never comin' home again til now ! "

He pulled the bedclothes from his face, and sat up. His hair was ruffled, and his eyes were blood-shot and red at the lids. He blinked at her sleepily, and again he yawned. . . . His long, yellow teeth sickened her for a moment. . . . She had longed for this man's return !

" You mean you want to tell them I run away from you ? " he said.

"Aye," she said, "it'll be best to do that. There's no good tellin' lies, an' then havin' to pile lies on the top of them!"

He lay back on the pillow, and did not speak for a few moments.

"Have you nothin' to suggest, James?" she said.

"That wee girl'll be quare an' upset if she knows the truth?" he said in a questioning tone.

"Aggie, do you mean?"

"Aye!"

"I daresay she will. So will Jamesey. That's natural enough. It's not nice nor pleasant to be thinkin' that your da's a man that deserted your mother, an' her with a child comin' on her!"

"She's the right wee girl, that!" he said, disregarding her remarks about himself. "I wouldn't have her upset for the world!"

"There's upsets for every one in the world, young or ould!"

"Ah, but not upsets the like of this one. It would be a pity to hurt the young girl! . . ."

"It'll have to be done sometime, an' it had better be done now nor later when it'll be harder!"

"Oh, but sure it mightn't get harder, Martha!" His voice had a new tone in it, a note of softness. "It might get easier. See here, Martha, don't say nothin' just yet a wee while, an' we'll mebbe find a way out of it. I'd like the wee girl to think well of me before she finds out the truth!"

She began to see into the man's mind. He was proud of Aggie, and was anxious to have her love. For the first time in his life he had shown respect for the opinion of another person. "She's the

right wee girl," he said to her. He had never said that of his wife. He offered no apologies to her for what he had done nor had he yet told her of what he had been doing while he was away; but he was fearful lest Aggie should turn away from him because of what he had done to her mother.

"I'll mebbe tell her myself," he said.

She smiled when he said that.

"Ah, you needn't laugh," he continued, "I'll tell her right enough when I've made her fond of me. She's near fond of me already. You'll not say nothin' to her yet a while, will you, Martha?" He leant across the bed and took her hand in his. "I treated you bad, Martha. I know that rightly, an' I'm quare an' sorry for it, but I'll do my best to make up to you for it. I will in sang!"

She knew that he had no regrets, and that this sudden display of sorrow was a trick to win her from her purpose of telling her story to her children, but although she knew that he was pretending to a repentance he did not feel, she felt sorry for him. It seemed wonderful to her that Aggie should have succeeded with him when Esther and she had failed, and maybe many another woman, too. That woman in Charlestown! . . . She asked him to tell her what he had been doing since he left her.

"Knockin' about," he said shortly.

She told him of the drunken sailor whose wife had been stolen from him in Charlestown.

"Och, her!" was all he said.

She got up from the bed and stood looking down on him. "You're poor comfort for a woman, James!" she said.

"Ah, for Jase' sake, don't start preachin'!" he exclaimed petulantly.

"What got you in the state you are?" she asked "You're not the man you were!"

"Knockin' about done it. . . . Quit talkin' for dear sake!"

"I've a right to know about you, James," she insisted. "You've come home to live on me I suppose . . . or were you thinkin' of lookin' for work!"

"I've done enough. I've come home for a rest!"

She sighed as she replied, "I thought so. Well, James, I don't mind what you do. You can work or not as you like. I've enough for the two of us, an' a bit over, but if you do stay here idlin' your time away, you'll do it on my terms. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you right enough!"

"What have you done, then, since you left me?"

"It's no good you askin' me them questions!..."

"I want to know. Just for the sake of the thing!"

"Well, you'll not be pleased with what you hear."

"I can't help that!"

He lay in silence, gazing at the ceiling, and she sat down again on the bed and waited for him to begin.

"I was in jail a while," he said at last.

"Ah, my God!..."

"I toul' you not to ask me questions!"

She cried for a few minutes, and then, gathering up her courage again, she dried her tears, and

asked him to go on with his story. But he would not tell her any more. When she asked him how he had earned his living, he said, "Knockin' about!" and would not speak more plainly.

"What did you come home for, then?" she said.

"I was tired of America, an' I thought mebbe I'd do better here," he replied. "An' I was right to come, too. You've a dacent house, Martha, but you were always the sort to get on. If I'd knowed before, I'd 'a' come home sooner. I hadn't a ha'penny when I landed in Liverpool. I worked my way across from America, an' I got a stoker on a Belfast boat to let me down into the stoke hole with him. He had the quare bother hidin' me. . . . He give me a shillin', and I bought my breakfast with it, and then started to walk here. I could hardly move an inch I was that weak, an' I lost my way on the Hollywood hills. That's why I was so late!" He stopped speaking, and then began to laugh. "It's quare to think of me workin' me passage home, an' walkin' all the way from Belfast without a bite in my belly, an' you here with a gran' shop an' plenty of money and food. . . . You done well with my money, Martha, that I left you when I went away!"

"I'm glad you think so!"

"Aye, you done well with it. . . . You'll not say a word to Aggie, will you? Not yet awhile!"

"She'll have to be told some time."

"No matter for that. I'll mebbe make up a story!"

She thought for a few moments, and then consented to keep silent. "Very well," she said, "I'll

not say nothin' yet, but it'll be hard to keep them from talkin'. It'll be you'll have to quieten them. I'll tell no lies for you. Will you be gettin' up now ? "

" After a minute or two," he replied. " Is there any porter in the house ? "

" There is not," she answered.

" I've a drouth on me you wouldn't hardly believe ! "

" There's plenty of buttermilk in the house," she said as she walked towards the door of the room.

" Buttermilk ! " he exclaimed in disgust.

When she returned to the kitchen, she found Esther standing there, dressed as for a journey.

" Esther ! " she exclaimed.

" I'm goin' now, Martha ! " Esther said, coming swiftly to her sister and putting her arms about her. " I couldn't stop another hour in the house, an' him here ! "

" But. . . ."

" It's all right, Martha, dear. I'm goin' over to Millisle to stay with Maggie Cather a wee while. I daresay they'll be willin' to lodge me til I think what I'm goin' to do. I might go to Belfast. That's what I think most about. You'll talk to Jamesey, will you not, about him comin' to lodge with me if I take a shop there. Ask him whereabouts in Belfast would be the best to go ! . . ." They could hear James stirring in the bedroom. " Don't keep me now, Martha. I don't want to see him again. I couldn't bear it ! "

" It's a pity, Esther, for you to be goin' like this ! "

"It would be a bigger pity for me to stop!" She paused for a few moments and gazed closely at her sister. She stood with her hands firmly fixed on Martha's arms, and then quickly pulled her to her and kissed her passionately. "I wish I wasn't leavin' you, Martha, but I have to. That's the God's truth! It's terrible to be longin' for a thing, an' then not want it when you get it. That's the way it is with me. You've won in the end, haven't you, Martha?"

"Have I, Esther?"

They walked towards the door of the house.

"Will I come down the road with you a wee bit?" Mrs. Martin asked as they passed out of the house.

"Aye, do, Martha," Esther replied. "I'll tell Johnny Cairnduff to call for my things, an' he can bring them over on the long car. It'll save me carryin' them myself."

They drifted down the street, talking of trivial things as they walked. Would Martha be sure to remember to tell the traveller from McLelland's in Belfast that the invoice for the last crate of crockery was not correctly made out? Would Esther like a pattern of the stuff Martha was getting for her new dress? Wasn't it quare the way the days were drawing in? There hadn't been much of a summer that year, though God knew it was better than the summer they had the year before. It was hard to tell what was coming over the weather nowadays, things were that changed. Did Esther remember the time when the snow was near six feet deep, and their da had to dig a passage from the door to the street before they

could get out or in ? There was no snow as deep as that these times. Some winters there was hardly enough snow to whiten the ground. Esther had read in the *Belfast Evening Telegraph* that the change in the climate had something to do with the Gulf Stream.

" Dear-a-dear ! " Mrs. Martin exclaimed when she heard of this, " isn't it quare the way things are ? "

They walked along the road leading to Millisle, Martha bareheaded and Esther wearing her Sunday hat.

" They'll be gettin' out of church in a wee while," Mrs. Martin said. " Aggie an' Jamesey'll be quarely disappointed when they hear you've gone ! "

Esther did not answer. She looked before her without seeing anything.

" Well, by-bye, Esther ! " Mrs. Martin said shortly.

" By-bye, Martha ! "

" You'll send word now an' again how you are ? "

Esther nodded her head.

" An' I'll let you know what Jamesey says about Belfast. He'll be right an' glad of your company, I'm sure ! "

" I hope so."

" Aye ! "

They stood as if they were waiting for something, but neither of them said any more. Then Mrs. Martin said, " By-bye, Esther ! " and Esther replied, " By-bye, Martha ! " but still they did not move.

" It'll be brave an' nice for your walk to Mill-

isle," Martha remarked because she had nothing else to say and yet could not turn to go home. She glanced up at the sky as she spoke. "It's kept up fine!" she added.

"Aye, it has."

They still stood about on the road, Esther gazing queerly in front of her, and Martha looking now at the sky and now at the sea, and now at Esther and now at the ground.

"Well, I'd better be gettin' back again," Martha said jerkily. She made a movement as she spoke, but Esther remained standing as stiffly as before.

"It'll be lonesome without you," Martha added. "The house'll not seem the same. But mebbe it's for the best. So, by-bye, Esther!"

"By-bye, Martha!"

Mrs. Martin walked off. She did not turn to look back at her sister, nor did she look on either side of her. She walked with her eyes fixed on the corner of the street where her house was. Some one called to her as she passed by, but she did not answer, and the woman who had called to her became sulky, and said to some one in her house that "them Mahaffys was always a proud lot!" She went on, holding her hands rigidly by her sides, walking as if she were trying not to see anything but the corner of the street in which she lived. Then she heard steps behind her, the sound of some one hastily pursuing her, and gasping cries and the choking noise of some one shouting with difficulty. When she turned round she saw that Esther was upon her, and before she could say "What ails you, Esther, dear?" she was fast in Esther's arms, and Esther was kissing her and

pressing her so tightly that she could scarcely breathe. And as suddenly as she was seized, she was released, and Esther, speaking nothing, was hurrying away, running on the road that led to Millisle.

"Didn't I always say them Mahaffys was quare!" exclaimed the woman who had greeted Martha without obtaining a response as she watched the sisters embrace and separate.

"Aye, they're the quare lot althegether!" said some one who could not be seen.

CHAPTER XII

ESTHER walked swiftly on the way to Millisle. She had left Ballyreagh behind her, and was now in the open country. There was no one on the road but herself, and so she allowed her emotion to have free expression. She cried as if she were hidden in a room, and her breasts heaved with anger. All her reserves were abandoned; her visions were destroyed. She was crying, not because James Martin had returned without love for her . . . she had ceased to weep on that account . . . but because he was not the man for whom she had longed. It was the waste of life for which she mourned. This wreck of a man was not the James Martin to whom she had given her love and her life. Her James Martin had been strong and rough and determined, and had had a deep chest and a clear eye and a hand that could crush a thing easily; but this James Martin was a shadow, a shifting shadow, rough, indeed, and full of hard words, but not strong, not clear eyed. . . .

Her tears ceased to flow, although her breasts still heaved. She began to talk to herself in a loud voice, and now and then she struck her hands together to emphasize some word that she spoke.

"Isn't it the quare fool you've been, Esther Mahaffy," she said, "to be waitin' all these years

for *that?* An' then him not carin' at all! You had little wit to be wastin' your time on him when there was many another man would have had you gladly, an' made you a good husband. The dirty beast, he is! To be treatin' me that way, an' me wouldn't have him now if he was to come on his hands an' knees an' beg me to have him!" She stopped in the middle of the road and made a gesture with her hands as if she were informing some incredulous listener of James Martin's conduct and appearance. "Did you see the look on his face?" she said. "Like a man that's never sober. All dirty-lookin' an' his eyes bloodshot! Och!"

She wrinkled her face into a look of loathing and disgust, and then resumed her walk. "It's a poor reward," she said to herself, "Martha's gettin' for her years of waitin' an' workin', an' I'm thinkin' she'll mebbe be sorrier he's here nor she was when he wasn't!" Her voice hardened, and a scowl came across her face. "Him an' his Aggie!" she exclaimed harshly. "Makin' little of me like that afore Jane Mahaffy, the bitter bitch, an' sayin' Aggie was nicer nor me when I was her age!" She struck her fists together. "It's a lie, that's what it is, an' well he knows it. I was nicer nor Aggie easy when I was as young as her, an' anybody that knew me could tell him that even if he didn't know it himself.

"There's not half the fellows comes after her that used to come after me, an' me not takin' no notice of them at all except him. An' this is all the thanks I get. . . . It serves me right . . . but I wouldn't have him now if he wanted me. I'd die sooner nor let him touch me again!"

She walked on for a while without speaking, though her thoughts continued to be active and angry. Sometimes her lips moved, but no sound came from them. When she had walked a little way in this manner, her foot struck against a stone in the road, and she kicked it violently before her, and then, when she came to it again, she stooped and picked it up. She turned and faced towards Ballyreagh and threw the stone as hard as she could down the road.

"I wish it would hit you," she said, and then she laughed. "Dear, oh dear!" she exclaimed, "amn't I the bad shot? But it would serve him right if he was to be hurted!"

Her anger abated, and she moved across the road and sat down on the grass under the hedge. "God, it's wet!" she said, hastily jumping up again. She stood feeling her clothes and gazing about her. "Well, I'm the quare one," she said to herself, "to be losin' my temper over the head of thon man! It's thankful I should be I'm not married on him. Poor ould Martha! . . . Och, but sure it's silly of her to be lettin' him stay with her. She knows rightly he's no good to her. She couldn't bear to sleep with him last night, an' no wonder, neither!" She shivered as she said this to herself.

She glanced about her, and then resumed her walk. "It's a quare nice day after the storm," she said aloud. "A quare nice day! . . . I'd better be hurryin', or the Cathers'll have had their dinner . . . I suppose Martha's layin' their dinner now! An' me made the broth yesterday!" Her anger returned for a moment or two. "I

wish it would choke him," she said passionately. Then her thoughts lay supine in her mind, and she simply walked along, but in a little while they lifted up again. "I wonder what time he got up?" she said to herself. "That was the nice hour to be lyin' to! Lettin' on he was tired! Lazy, he was, that's what he was! I wouldn't put it past him. Martha saw the changed he was, the way I did, too. Aye, indeed she did! She said herself he was changed. An' so he is! You would near think it wasn't the same man. . . . I wonder will she sleep with him the night, or what will she do? I wouldn't go anear him. . . . If Jamesey'll come an' lodge with me in Belfast, I'll be happy an' content. I wish Jamesey wasn't like his da. . . . Maggie Cather'll wonder what brings me at this time of day. I'll have to tell her somethin' or another! . . ."

She came to the gateway of a field, and she stopped for a while to look at a flight of sea-birds across the sky. They circled in the air, calling to each other, and then came down with fluttering wings and settled in the middle of the field.

"Them's the lovely birds!" she exclaimed, gazing at them as they made little short flights from the ground and then sank quickly back again and contended together for the food they had discovered. Beyond them lay the sea, no longer raging as it had been in the night. It was very high, and the waves were broken so that they looked like beaten silver in the sunlight. The seas rolling up in great folds had subsided, and now there were little splashing curves of water running and twisting and jumping and falling

in white confusion. The sky was full of fleecy white clouds that had grey edges, and here and there was a big space of blue heaven. The ships that had endured the roughness of the night were sailing on the sea in peace; there was a look of proud relief about them, as if they were glad the storm was over, but were pleased to remember that they had not submitted to it. The little fishing-smacks at anchor were rocked as gently by the sea as a child in its cradle is rocked by its mother, and the boats that sailed about the coast hung out their sails of white and brown as if they were banners carried by a company of victorious soldiers. The air was full of soft sounds: birds calling to their mates, and cattle moo-ing to their calves, and children shouting in exultation because the day was fine and the sun was shining and the wind blew blithely from the sea; and mingled with these sounds were the sharp shouts of men labouring in the fields and the slow crack-crack of a cart lumbering down a lane while the driver sang to himself and the horse, and cracked his whip in the air. Esther drew in a long breath, and smelt the kindly smell of burning furze. She turned her head to look across the road at a field of flax in flower, and while she stood thus, a cow came splashing through the mud at the gate and stood near to her. She turned and looked into its large, clear, placid eyes, and held out her hand to it. It mooed quietly and thrust its muzzle forward and nosed her for a while; and then it moved away a few steps and mooed again. A calf came running up to it in the half-tumbling style of a young, weak thing, and when it saw

Esther, it thrust its tiny head through the bars of the gate, and began to suckle her fingers.

"Ah, aren't you the darlin' wee thing!" she said, stroking its head. "An' that friendly an' all! You know rightly I wouldn't harm you!"

The cow came closer to the gate, and Esther withdrew her fingers from the calf's mouth, and patted the cow on the side, and when she had done so, it mooed again.

"Aye, indeed that's true!" said Esther to the cow.

The calf thrust its mother aside and tried to recapture her fingers.

"No, no," exclaimed Esther laughingly, "I don't want to be sucked any more, you wee tory you! Away on with you! Away to your ma, there!" She tried to push it towards the cow, but it resisted her. "Well, there you are then, you wee rascal!" she said, giving her fingers into its mouth again. She turned to the cow and spoke to it. "Are you waitin' for the man to come an' feed you?" she said. "An' is it late he is? Ah, sure, they're like that. They don't care whether they come soon or late, so long's they get what they want! . . . Och, is it takin' the hand off me, you are?" she exclaimed suddenly to the calf, pulling her fingers from its mouth. "It's a wee lad you are, by the eager you are!"

The cow heard a noise at the other end of the field, and it turned quickly and ran off, moo-ing loudly like a trumpet as it ran, and the calf, with tail awry, went scampering after it.

"It's a nice baste, that!" said Esther as she watched the cow out of sight.

The sea-birds rose in the air again. They circled higher and higher until they became a thin, dark line against the light of the morning, and than her eyes tired of watching them.

"I wish I could do that," she said, and she turned away from the gate and resumed her walk on the road to Millisle. "It's a quare pity of a woman," she reflected, "that has a thing in her mind the time I've had him in mine, an' then it to be destroyed on her!"

Maggie Cather was sitting at the door of her home when Esther came up to the house. She jumped to her feet when she saw the visitor and ran to greet her. "For dear sake, Esther!" she exclaimed, "is that you?"

"Aye it is, Maggie," Esther replied, "an' I've come to stay with you a wee while. Will you let me?"

"Will I let you!" said Maggie in the tone of one who cannot understand why people will question foolishly. "Sure I will, an' welcome. My da an' ma'll be glad to see you. . . . But what are you comin' for? Are you fell out with Martha?" She laughed as she said this, for it was a joke with the Cathers that no one could quarrel with Martha, however much they might try to do so. "Or are you havin' a holiday or what?"

"I've left Martha's!" said Esther.

Maggie Cather's face lost its smile. "You've left her!" she exclaimed in dismay. "God bless my soul! . . ."

"I'll tell you about it in a wee while, Maggie. Can I come in now?"

"Aye do, Esther!"

They entered the cottage, and saw Mr. Cather, a lean, kindly man, sitting in the window-seat. He rose and shook hands with Esther as she entered. "I saw you comin' up the walk," he said. "An' how are you this mornin', I'm right an' glad to see you!"

"I'm bravely, thank you," Esther replied, sitting down as she spoke.

"Da," said Maggie Cather, "Esther's come to stay with us a wee while! . . ."

"Aye, daughter?"

"If you'll have me, Mr. Cather!" said Esther, smiling at the old man.

He went to her and patted her cheek. "You know rightly you're welcome in this house, Esther, an' anyone of your family!" He resumed his seat. "Tell your ma, Maggie. She's out in the yard strainin' the potatoes!"

Mrs. Cather, carrying a pot of steaming potatoes, came into the kitchen from the yard as he said this.

"Well, Esther," she said, "is that yourself?"

"She's left Martha's, ma!" said Maggie abruptly, "an' she's come to stay with us a wee while!"

Mrs. Cather put the pot on the hob and turned to look in astonishment at Esther. "What made you do that?" she said to Esther.

"Her man's come back home!" Esther replied.

"Her man! . . . Do you mean to tell me he's not dead?" Esther nodded her head. "Come back again? . . ."

"He has, indeed!" said Esther, and then she told them what she knew of his story.

"Well, wonders'll never cease!" Mrs. Cather exclaimed. "To think of him comin' back to

the world again. Where has he been all the time ? "

Esther said that she did not know. She had not waited to hear the story of his adventures.

" What made you leave Martha now, then ? " said Mrs. Cather, as they sat down to their dinner.

" I can't bear James," Esther replied. " He's an awful man ! . . ." She hesitated for a second or two, and then added, " I never did care much for him, an' now he's so different from what he was that I just can't bear him at all ! "

Maggie Cather looked at her sharply. " I didn't know you felt that way about him," she said.

" Aye, indeed I do," Esther replied, looking at her steadily. " Wait to you see him yourself, Maggie, an' you'll not be wonderin' at me not stoppin' there any more. Mrs. Cather, dear, this is the quare nice broth ? Did you make it yourself ? "

" No, Maggie made it yesterday. Now, tell me, Esther, what like is your sister's man ? . . ."

She slept with Maggie Cather that night, and when they were stretched in bed together, she tried hard to sleep, but she could not do so. Her mind flitted continually towards Ballyreagh and she wondered about this and about that. What were they doing now ? Had James asked where she was ? What had Jamesey and Aggie said when they learned that she had left the house. Had people called to see James and ask

what he had been doing all these years ? What had he been doing ? . . . Did anyone notice that she was not there ? Did anyone remember the talk there used to be about James and her before he went away ? She fancied that she could hear them whispering together. " So the sister's not here after all ! " " No, she's away til friends they tell me ! " " It looks as if it was true, that yarn we heard about her an' him ! " " Aye ! Och, well you could hardly expect the woman to keep her in the house now after the way she behaved afore. Did you never hear the story of it ? They were caught thegether up at the Moat one night. It was her own brother caught them ! . . ."

Damn them, that's what they would be saying to each other about her, and then they would look at him, as he now was, that ugly, horrible man, and they would think that *that* was the man she had loved. They would not have the wit to know that the man in whose arms she had lain that night at the Moat was a different sort of man, and they would say to themselves, " It's quare for a fine-lookin' woman to be lettin' herself go on a man like that ! " She had not let herself go on a man like that ! They were liars if they said that. . . . They wouldn't know that she went away from the house because she couldn't bear to look at him. They would think that Martha had turned her out, or that James was in no mood for her, and had caused her to be sent away. . . . She twisted suddenly in her anger, and Maggie Cather, who was almost asleep, sat up quickly in the bed.

" What is it, Esther ? " she said. " What ails you ? "

Esther became quiet. She lay on her side and did not speak.

"Esther," Maggie repeated, leaning over and trying to turn her round so that she could see her face, "what's the matter? Are you not well?"

"I'm well enough, Maggie!"

"But you're all tremblin'! . . . Are you sorry you left Martha?"

Esther turned quickly to her. "No, I'm not, Maggie!" she exclaimed quickly. "I'm glad! I'm glad, do you hear! I wouldn't stay in that house no more—not for the whole world. I left of my own free will."

"Did you not like Martha?"

"It's not her, Maggie. I love her, an' I'm heartsore to be leavin' her. It's him. I hate him. I can't bear him. Oh, Maggie, I'd give the world an' all to have my life over again! . . ."

She buried her face in Maggie's nightdress and began to cry.

"Are you in love with him, Esther," said Maggie softly.

"No, I tell you. I hate him. . . ."

"There were stories put about! . . ."

"I know there was. An' they were true stories, some of them, but they're not true no more, for I'd walk the streets afore I'd let him come anear me again. You wouldn't hardly believe the change there is in him. An' I've wasted all this time on him, Maggie. Sixteen years. It's awful, Maggie, to think of that. It's a sin, that's what it is! I never thought I'd feel like that about him, but I do, an' I can't help it. When I think of him I want to throw-off. That's how it is, an' I

couldn't stay in the house with him no more. There'll mebbe be some'll say I had to go for fear it would begin all over again. Jane'll say that. I know she will. That's the kind she is, an' she'll go about spreadin' lies, but it's not true, none of it, Maggie, so it's not ! ''

She became quiet, and presently she and Maggie lay down again, and in a short while she could hear Maggie's slow, steady breathing, and she knew that she was asleep. She lay still. Sixteen years, she thought to herself, sixteen years of hope and long desires . . . and then in a minute . . . nothing !

When the darkness was splintered by the morning, and the clouds lost their blackness and became fleecy and shining as the sun strode up the heavens throwing long trails of light behind him, she was lying there by Maggie Cather's side, still mourning for her lost years.

CHAPTER XIII

The Reverend William Haveron, the Presbyterian minister, was a stoutly built man with a ponderous manner. His square face was padded with loose flesh, and his lips seemed to be too long for his mouth : they could not be compressed without great creases appearing on either side of them. He wore little dark side-whiskers that stopped by his ears, and save for these, he was clean-shaven ; for he was very proud of his regular, white teeth and was unwilling to hide them behind a moustache or beard. He had a fat, comfortable look, and the irreverent called him " Oily Willie " ; but his bulk and ease were not accompanied by a sense of humour. Heaven had been pleased to build the Reverend William Haveron, as, indeed, it had been pleased to build many Presbyterian ministers in the North of Ireland, without humour or perception : in place of these, he had self-sufficiency. He did not walk : he swayed. He came at you like a pendulum. When he stood in the pulpit, with closed eyes and hands tightly clasped over the big open Bible, his body swayed slowly from side to side while he recited the long, cumbersome, spiritless prayers he had invented on the previous day. Little boys, holding their hands over their faces as if they were consumed with piety, would

peep through their distended fingers at the swaying preacher, fascinated by the thought that one day he might sway too far. . . .

He read long sermons, full of turgid phrases, and he seldom failed to fill an hour with his thoughts on wickedness. The fact that his thoughts had been worn to shreds by other dull preachers did not deter him from wearing them still more; indeed, he was so pleased with what he composed that sometimes he preached the same sermon twice in the course of the year. When he exchanged pulpits with a minister from Belfast or Newtownards or Bangor, he economized in sermons ; for he read one which he had preached on the previous Sunday to the fresh congregation. It was said of him that once, when he had exchanged pulpits with the Methodist minister in Ballyreagh, he preached to the Methodists in the evening the sermon which he had preached to the Presbyterians in the morning.

It was this man who came swaying to Mrs. Martin's house on Sunday afternoon. Mr. and Mrs. Mahaffy were in his company.

Mrs. Martin and her husband were sitting before the fire, and Aggie was sitting near them, reading a magazine. Jamesey had wandered down to the shore to gather dulce and limpets, he said, though the truth was that he was eager to get away from his father's presence. He had been told, when he came home from church that morning, that his Aunt Esther had suddenly decided to go and stay with the Cathers for a time, and he was disturbed in his mind by her resolve. He brooded over her absence during the dinner-time, and gradually

he began to associate it with his father's return to his home. He could not understand his father. He had not yet said a word about the cause of his disappearance, nor had his mother again referred to the subject. Aggie was so flattered by her father's unconcealed pride in her that she was content to wait until he chose to explain his absence; but Jamesey was not so content. . . . So he had gone down to the rocks to gather dulce and limpets as he said, but very few did he gather. He sat down on a large rock where the sea-weed was dry, and tried to solve the mystery of his father's life . . . and while he sat with his head in his hands, gazing into a pool of salt water at his feet, the Reverend William Haveron knocked at Mrs. Martin's door.

"It's Mr. Haveron, ma!" exclaimed Aggie, hastily rising and hiding her magazine.

"How're you Aggie," said the minister, offering his fat, freckled fingers to the girl. "I've just come in to have a talk with your father!"

"I'm rightly, thank you, Mr. Haveron!" said Aggie, withdrawing to the side of the kitchen. She had the sense of discomfort which all young men and women in Ireland have in the presence of a minister or a priest. She forgot to greet her uncle and aunt until they reminded her of their presence.

The minister walked over to Martha, who had risen at his entry. "I'm glad to see you lookin' so well, Mrs. Martin, though I didn't see you in church this mornin'!" He offered the fat, freckled fingers to her, too, and then turned towards her husband. "This is Mr. Martin, I suppose?" he said.

Henry Mahaffy and his wife sat down together in the manner of people who have come to listen to a story which they hope will end badly for those who relate it. They did not speak after they had bidden " Good-mornin' ! " to Martha and James.

" Yes, Mr. Haveron," Mrs. Martin replied to the minister, " this is James ! "

James Martin still lolled in his chair, but he had put his pipe aside. A scowl went over his face when he saw the minister come towards him, and then went away again. He got up from his seat, and took the minister's hand. " How're you, sir ! " he said.

" I'm middling well," Mr. Haveron replied, " and I'm very glad indeed to see you, and to learn that you have returned to your family in safety." He made a notion with his hand towards Henry Mahaffy and his wife. " Your dear brother and sister here have been tellin' me about you, an' I was naturally interested to see you and to learn about your life since you left home ! "

" It was very thoughtful of them," James Martin muttered, as he glanced heavily at his brother-in-law. " I'm obliged to them for the interest they're takin' in me ! "

The minister made a noise of satisfaction with his tongue against his palate. " Aye," he said. " Aye, indeed ! Of course, Mr. Martin, your wife does not belong to my congregation, so mebbe I have no right to be here, but then your brother an' your sister do, an' your son an' daughter come many a time to hear me preach ! . . ."

" Oh, aye," said James vaguely.

" But mebbe, now you're home, she'll come, too.

I've no doubt you'll bring her with you to the Lord's house. I don't suppose you're an Episcopalian, an' if you're not, you might as well come to my church as go elsewhere. It's a grand thing to see a united family in God's house. . . ." He turned to Martha. "Mebbe I'd better say a word of prayer before we sit down and have a talk together. Just to thank God for all His goodness to us, and for bringing your husband safely home to you!"

Mrs. Martin looked at her husband, and for a moment or two she had a desire to laugh out loud, but she checked it, and said to the minister, "Aye, you can pray if you like!"

Mr. Haveron closed his eyes and began to pray, and instantly Henry Mahaffy and his wife knelt down on their knees and buried their faces in their hands. Aggie, too, knelt down, but her father and her mother remained as they were. James Martin looked at the swaying form of the minister as if he were in doubt what to do, and then, with a look of inquiry at Martha, he leant forward in his chair and rested his chin on his upturned arm. He could get no nearer to piety than that.

It was a long prayer, full of windy sentences, and it included clauses of appeal in behalf of each member of the household, and ended in a wide, general appeal for all "Thy people"; and when it was finished Henry and his wife said "Amen" very fervently, and then the minister, after a pause of a few seconds, said "Amen" with equal fervour.

"Well, now," said the minister, as the others scrambled to their feet, "tell us all about yourself, Mr. Martin!"

Jane Mahaffy managed to whisper to her husband a remark about Martha. "She never knelt down when the minister prayed," she said. "I peeped at her between my fingers!"

"Dear, dear!" her husband said, wagging his head in disapproval. "I think she might have closed her eyes anyway!"

"There's nothin' to tell, sir!" James replied to the minister. "I've been away, an' I've come home again. That's all!"

Mr. Haveron smiled beneficently at James. "Ah, Mr. Martin," he said, "we know you've been away, but *where* have you been? You know it wasn't just a day you were away, or a week. It was—how long was it, Mrs. Mahaffy?"

"Sixteen years, Mr. Haveron!" said Jane Mahaffy.

"Aye. That's it. You told me in the vestry this mornin' I remember. Sixteen years! Yes! That's a long while, Mr. Martin, for a man to be away from his wife and family. I daresay you had some good reason for not returning to your home before this!" He waited for James to reply, but James did not answer.

Mrs. Martin moved a little nearer to the centre of the room, and stood for a while looking at the minister and her husband, and then at her brother and his wife.

"Mr. Haveron," she said, "what are you here for?"

The minister sat up in his chair. "What am I here for?" he said.

"Aye. Did Henry an' Jane bring you here to be askin' a wheen of questions, because if that's

what you've come for, you can go back the same road you come ! . . ."

There was real indignation in Henry Mahaffy's voice when he got up quickly from his seat, and said to Mrs. Martin, "Martha, woman, you're forgettin' yourself althegether. Do you not know who it is you're talkin' to ?"

Mrs. Martin waved to him to sit down again. "I know rightly," she answered. "If the minister's come here for the sake of friendship to see James, I'm glad to see him, but if he's just come because you an' Jane—aye, you Jane !—have set him on to cross-questionin' him, he's not welcome, an' you're not welcome neither, the pair of you !"

The minister stood up and glanced about him in an awkward manner. "I must say," he said, "this is not the sort of reception I expected, nor is it the kind I'm accustomed to !"

Mrs. Mahaffy tossed her head and declared her hope that he was not so treated in other houses. In her opinion it was nothing short of a shame and a scandal that a good man had been affronted in the way in which Mr. Haveron had been affronted by Martha.

"An' sorry I am," she concluded, "to have to say the like about my own, though we're not blood-related, but only by marriage !"

"I'm surprised at you, Martha !" exclaimed Henry Mahaffy, "I'm more nor surprised at you for goin' on the way you've just done !" He turned and addressed the minister. "I can't apologize to you enough, Mr. Haveron, for the poor reception you've had in this house, but you know well it's not the reception you would have got from me or

my wife. My sister here was always a headstrong woman, and her own da on his deathbed wouldn't be reconciled to her ! . . ."

" You can get out of this house as quick as you like, Henry Mahaffy ! " said James Martin, leaning back in his chair. " You're not wanted here ! "

The minister interposed between James and the angry Henry Mahaffy. He held up his hand as if he were pronouncing a blessing, and as he did so, his india-rubber cuffs shot out of his sleeves so that they almost enveloped his hands. " Now, now," he said in a modulating voice," this is very unseemly talk for brothers to be indulging in. Quieten yourself down, Henry, and leave me to do the talking ! " He motioned to Mahaffy to re-seat himself, and Henry did so scowling hard. " Now, Mr. Martin," said the minister, addressing James, " I'll not deny that I come here the day to find out what your intentions are about your life among us, and what you have been doing since you went away. It's a duty I owe to the Almighty ! . . ."

" Your duty, Mr. Haveron," Mrs. Martin interrupted, " is to mind your own business ! "

Mr. Haveron stiffened when he heard Mrs. Martin's voice, and he turned to her with solemn manner, and said, " My duty, Mrs. Martin, is to One Above, and I don't need any instruction in it from anyone on earth. I have a purpose in coming here to-day. Your brother and sister have told me of some of the events of your husband's life before he went away ! . . ."

Mrs. Martin's face flushed, and then she went swiftly to her brother and stood so close to him

that he became alarmed and almost fell off his seat in his endeavour to get away from her.

"If you strike me! . . ." he began, when she interrupted him.

"Strike you," she exclaimed. "I wouldn't lay a finger on you, you old clatterbash you! How dare you go about spreadin' stories. You an' Jane is a couple of backbiters, that's what you are. I might 'a' knowed you wouldn't be content to be sittin' still like dacent people, but would have to be runnin' roun' tellin' tales in this place an' in that! . . ."

"Mind yourself, Martha Martin!" said Mrs. Mahaffy warningly. "Just mind yourself!"

"Mind myself is it?" shouted Mrs. Martin, now more angry than before, swinging round on her sister-in-law. "Is it you tells me to mind myself? Let you mind your ownself, Jane Mahaffy, for it's you that needs mindin'. An' your man, too! Let him mind himself, an' not be interferin' in other people's concerns. If he was as anxious about his own work as he is about other bodies', he wouldn't be losin' money the way he is, an' custom, too! . . ." She hurt Henry Mahaffy where he least liked to be hurt. The railway development had injured his carting trade. "Let him mind that, an' he'll have enough to do! An' let you go an' mind it too, an' not be forever pokin' your nose where it's not wanted. There's people in this town is tired to death of the sight of you because you're always clatterin' an' clashin' about their affairs!" She paused to take breath, and with pausing, she lost some of her rage. "It's a nice thing," she said to the minister, "when a

man of your callin' comes into people's houses with tales he's heard from neighbours, an' them spiteful mebbe, an' makes disturbance among people never done him no harm."

Mr. Haveron besought her to calm herself. Nothing was so remote from his mind as any idea of interference in what did not concern him; but this matter, he assured her, did concern him. The door opened while he was speaking, and Jamesey entered. He stopped in the doorway when he saw the angry group before him. "What's up?" he said.

"There's nothin' up," his mother replied, "but your Uncle Henry an' your Aunt Jane's tryin' to make a lot!"

"Mebbe," said the minister in a conciliatory voice, "you would rather we had our conversation in private, Mrs. Martin. I see your young daughter is present, and now your young son is present, too, and mebbe you would rather they didn't hear what I have to say!" He proceeded as if he had suddenly realized what was the cause of Mrs. Martin's outburst, and thoroughly approved of it, and even blamed himself for not having thought of the young girl before. "I quite understand your feelings," he said. "I ought to have thought of this before!" He went over to the place where Aggie was seated. She stood up as he approached her, and he put his hand on her shoulder and drew her towards her brother on whose shoulder he placed his other hand. "You're a young pair," he said, "starting the world, an' there's some things that you're better without knowing. Now, will you both go out for a walk while your ma and me has our discussion! . . ."

Mrs. Martin went over to him and pulled his hand off her children's shoulders. "Are you orderin' my childer out of their own home," she said.

"Now, now, be reasonable, Mrs. Martin!" said the minister with some petulance in his tone, for he was not used to being treated as Mrs. Martin had treated him.

"Is it reasonable," she replied, "to walk into a person's house without let or leave, an' be askin' them questions, an' orderin' their children about? . . ."

"Martha, woman! . . ." said Henry.

"Don't talk to me, Henry Mahaffy," she exclaimed. "Don't talk to me, do you hear? I'll not have you in this house again, you nor your wife, after the way you've treated me!"

She stopped short, and there was a long silence in the room. She went over to the fire and sat down with her back to the others so that they could not see her face.

James Martin, who had laid his pipe aside on the entry of the minister, took it up again, and when he had re-lighted it, sat quietly in his chair blowing clouds of smoke around him. He did not offer to join in the discussion. He looked at Aggie and saw that she was agitated, and when he caught her eye, he beckoned to her, and she came to him, and he made her sit down beside him. "Don't be upset, daughter!" he said to her in a whisper.

It was Jamesey who broke the big silence. "In the name of God," he said, "will you tell me what all the row is about?" He crossed the room and stood in front of his mother. She looked up at

him, and he could see that her eyes were very bright, and that her cheeks were flaming. "What's wrong, ma?" he asked of her.

"Nothin', son! . . ."

"Och, ma, what's the good of talkin' that way!"

The minister nodded his head in agreement. "Aye, indeed!" he said, "what is the good of talkin' that way. After all, the young people are old enough to heed the truth, and it's better they should hear it from us, nor be hearing it all distorted by gossips in the town!"

"What truth, Mr. Haveron?" demanded Jamesey.

The minister looked about the room as if he were assuring himself that his congregation were listening attentively to what he had to say. "Is your Aunt Esther here?" he said decisively.

James Martin ceased to smoke quietly. He put his pipe down and shouted at the minister. "What the hell's it got to do with you where she is?" he demanded, standing before the horrified clergyman with his face thrust forward so that he almost touched Mr. Haveron's nose. "Didn't you hear my wife tellin' you to get out of this? Well, go on, then! An' you, too, the pair of you!" he added, turning to Henry Mahaffy and his wife.

"It's to save her from hell, I'm here!" said the minister.

"Save her from my grandmother! Who's tryin' to harm her?" The minister opened his mouth to speak, but James evidently thought it, advisable to silence him, for he hurriedly went on with his remarks. "Go on, now, an' don't let

me have to be tellin' you another time. I'm not near as fond of ministers as Henry Mahaffy there, an' mebbe if I lost my temper I might do you an injury that I'd be sorry for ! "

Jamesey came between his father and the minister. " Da," he said, " mind what you're doin'. You can't go about hittin' people in this country whatever you done where you come from. What's all this bother about ? . . ."

His father caught him a sudden blow on the chin, and sent him reeling across the floor. " Don't stan' there talkin' to me, you pup you ! " he said.

Jamesey fell against the edge of a chair, and for a little while lay stunned on the floor. There was a cut over his eye, and the blood began to dribble down his face on to his clothes. Aggie sprang up from her seat, crying out to her mother that Jamesey was killed, and Jane Mahaffy ran to Martha and shook her shoulder.

" Look what your man's done," she screamed. " He's killed your son ! . . ."

She got up from her place by the fire and turned slowly round. She saw her husband standing before her in a crouching attitude with a horrible look of cruelty on his face, while behind him stood the minister, white with fear. Her son was raising himself from the floor in a dazed manner, and as he did so, the blood dropped from his face and clothes on to the tiles. For a few moments she was silent and inactive, as if she were paralysed, and then she called quickly to Aggie : " Quick, Aggie, get a basin of cold water ! "

Aggie ran to do her bidding, and while she was

doing it, her mother raised Jamesey up from the floor. " You're all right, son ! " she said.

" Aye, ma ! " he answered, as she laid him gently in the chair.

Aggie returned to the kitchen with the cold water, and Mrs. Martin bathed her son's face, and bandaged it. " Go for the doctor, Aggie, an' don't be long ! . . ." She looked up as she spoke, and seemed to remember that other people were present. " Will you go now, if you please ! " she said to the minister, and to her brother and his wife.

" I'm sorry about Jamesey, Mrs. Martin ! . . ." said the minister, fumbling with his tall hat.

" Shut the door quietly ! " she interrupted.

Mr. Haveron bowed his head, and was about to close his eyes, when James Martin turned to him, and pointed towards the door.

" We don't want no more prayers," he said. " Get out, or I'll put you out ! "

Henry Mahaffy and his wife went quickly to the door and out into the street, and the minister followed them.

" I'm not done with you yet, my man ! " he said to James, as he went out.

When he had gone, James Martin went back to the seat in which he had been sitting when the trouble began. " I'm sorry I hit the lad," he said, " but he'd no call to be interferin' with me ! "

She did not answer him, and he gazed at her questioningly as if he wondered what were in her mind.

" Son or no son," he continued, " I'm not goin' to be checked by him ! . . ."

Jamesey made a movement, but his mother stopped him, and whispered to him to be quiet. "Never mind him, son dear!" she said. "We'll talk about him afterwards. You sit still now, and be restin' yourself! . . ."

"What was that about my Aunt Esther?" Jamesey said. "What did the minister want with her?"

"Och, nothin', son! Don't be talkin' now! Your da's sorry he struck you. It was temper made him do it. He hadn't the control of himself—your Uncle Henry an' Mr. Haveron put him out, an' he forgot himself!"

James Martin came forward as she said this, and stood by his son's side. "Aye, Jamesey," he said, "that's true. I didn't mean to strike you!"

"Mebbe you didn't!" Jamesey murmured, as he turned away from his father's face. "It's not the blow I'm thinkin' of. It's my Aunt Esther. What did she leave the house for so sudden? An' why did the minister ask for her the way he did, an' say he wanted to save her from hell? That's what I want to know. There's many a thing I want to hear about. You bein' away all this time, da!" He turned again to his father as he spoke, "An' then comin' home again the quare way you did!"

Mrs. Martin put her arms round him, and pressed him to her. "Be quiet, son," she said, "an' I'll tell you all about it myself when you're better a bit. You've the nasty cut on your head, an' you're weak with the loss of blood. The doctor'll be here in a wee while, an' then you'll go an' lie down in your bed an' have a long rest. You'll not go up to

Belfast the morrow to your work. . . . Listen, your Aunt Esther wants to start a shop in Belfast, an' she wants you to go an' lodge with her, the way you'll be company for her, an' she can look after you proper. Now, be quiet, now, an' don't be botherin' your head with questions ! "

The door opened, and Aggie entered followed by Dr. McMeekan.

" Here's the doctor, now, son ! " Mrs. Martin said.

" Hilloa," said the doctor, " what's the matter with you, young fellow ! " He went up to Jamesey and examined his face. " Cut yourself, eh ? " he said.

" Yes, doctor," said Mrs. Martin, " he slipped an' hurt himself ! "

" Ah ! " said the doctor. " Well, we'll soon have him all right. He needs a stitch or two ! . . ."

Aggie stood against the dresser while the doctor looked at her brother. Her hands were clasped together, and she was crying. Her father crept up to her, and touched her. She looked up at him, and then turned away.

" I didn't mean to hurt him," he said. " I declare to God, I didn't Aggie ! " He looked about him to see if the doctor was listening to him, and then, seeing that he was occupied with Jamesey continued to speak to his daughter. " Don't be turnin' against me, Aggie, over the head of it," he pleaded. " You're the only one in the house that's for me . . . that's the God's truth, I'm tellin' you. I'll be a good da to you, I will by Jase ! . . ."

She would not listen to him. She went to the

door and opened it and went out. He followed her to the door, and watched her. She walked a little way, and then looked round, and when she saw him standing at the door, she ran down the road to Millisle. He hesitated for a moment or two, and then, closing the door behind him, he ran after her.

CHAPTER XIV

She ran swiftly up the road until she came to the place where it went over the railway line, and then she climbed over a stile into a field that led to the sea. She went across the field and let herself down on to the shore below, slipping and sliding down the shingly surface and catching hold of the bent when it seemed that she was likely to fall. There was a large rock, covered with dry seaweed and barnacles, laying at the foot of the cliff, and she sat down on it, panting with her effort and her grief. She did not see her father following her, and he kept out of her sight until he reached the edge of the field. He lay flat on the grass and looked over at his daughter. "Aggie!" he said softly, "Hi, Aggie!"

She started up from the rock when she heard his voice, and turned to look at him with frightened eyes. "Oh, da!" she exclaimed fearfully.

"Don't be frightened, daughter!" he called to her. "I didn't want to scare you! . . ." He scrambled down the face of the cliff and stood beside her. "You've no need to be afeard of me, Aggie!" he said, taking her hands in his and drawing her to him. "You know rightly I wouldn't harm a hair of your head. I lost my temper over the minister an' your Uncle Henry. I didn't

mean to hit Jamesey at all. I just didn't know what I was doin', an' I hit out without thinkin'. . . I'm quaren sorry, Aggie ! "

She withdrew her hands from his, and suddenly her tears came, and she could not control them. She sat down again on the rock and held her hands to her face and sobbed as if she were choking. Her agitation disturbed him, and he stood gazing at her in a helpless fashion. He patted her shoulder and said, " There now, Aggie, there now ! " and then feeling that his comfort was poor, he turned away and shifted about in a nervous manner. " Don't be cryin'," he said to her, but she made no response to his appeal, and he saw that her grief must be expended. He walked a few paces away from her and stood with his hands in his pocket, gazing out over the Irish Sea. The tide had fallen and the sea was less lively than it had been in the morning when Esther had set out for Millisle. There was a little lapping sound of water running over pebbles and sinking out of sight through the sand and shingle, and the noise of stones rattling together as they were flung forward by the waves and then drawn back again as the sea fell away from the shore. He glanced about him and was glad to find that no one was in sight. The sun was riding down the heavens, leaving trails of golden light that shot across the amethystine sky. The clouds were like films of fire, and while he gazed at them he felt that he was moved by the great quietude and beauty about him. He turned away from the scene of loveliness to look at Aggie, but she was still crying and he did not dare to speak to her. There was something about her, the

shiny look of her hair or the delicate shape of her hands as she held them over her eyes, which stirred some emotion of fatherhood in him and made him long to go to her and lift her up from the rock on which she sat and fold her tightly in his arms and kiss her tears from her eyes. While he looked at her, a shiver of feeling went through him, and he felt that he must cry too. . . . Then he stooped and picked up a pebble and flung it into the sea. It rose up into the air and made a white mark against the sunlight, and then it fell with a dull splash into the sea. He picked up a round flat stone and flung it across the surface of the water so that it went skimming along, striking the sea here and making a little white splash, and leaping clear of it there, until its force was expended and it tumbled into the trough of a wave. A big rock, black and shining, stood out of the sea some distance from the shore, and the waves broke over it so that it could not be seen, and then fell away from it, leaving its black head to sparkle in the rays of the sun until another wave came curling along, and rose up and buried it in white foam.

He took up a handful of pebbles and began to throw them at the rock to see how many times he could strike it before it became submerged. His first stone missed it, and so did his second, but just as a wave with a green tongue rose to lick the rock's head, his stone bounded on to it with a sharp crack, and then leaped up into the air and tumbled into the water.

"You hit it that time, da!" said Aggie.

He turned round and saw her standing watching

him. Her tears had dried, though her eyes were red with her weeping.

"It was a good shot that, da!" she added, coming up to him.

"Aye, it wasn't bad," he replied, "but I missed it the first two times. Are you all right again, Aggie?"

She did not answer, but he saw that she was not angry with him any more. "Here," he said, "you come an' have a throw at it!" He handed some pebbles to her, and she threw them at the rock, but so wide of it, that they both fell to laughing at her efforts. "Sure, a woman's no good at cloddin' at all!" he said. "Here, look here!" He took up a stone and threw it at the rock which it struck with a loud smack. "That's the way you should clod," he said. "Did you ever try skimmin' the water with a stone, Aggie?"

"Och, aye, da, many's a time, but sure I can never do it right. Jamesey's the great lad at it! . . ."

He dropped the stones he held in his hand, and put his arm round her waist. "You're not put out with me any more, are you?" he said to her.

"No, da," she answered. "I know you didn't mean no harm—only I didn't like the way you were lookin' when you hit Jamesey!"

"What way was I lookin'?"

She shuffled out of his embrace and moved a few steps away from him. "Och, it doesn't matter," she said.

"Do you not want to tell me?" he asked, coming near to her.

"No, da. . . . Here, clod this stone, will you, at the rock! . . . No, wait a wee while. There's a

sea-gull lightin' on it! Och, isn't it nice, da, the way it stan's there takin' no more notice of the sea nor a fly. . . ." She clapped her hands at the bird, but it did not move. "Shoosh, bird!" she shouted, "away with you or you'll get wet!" A wave tumbled over the rock, and the sea-gull fluttered above it for a few moments and then flew off, spreading its long wings out, and sailing through the air in wide circles until it disappeared behind the headland. "I'll play you who hits the rock the most times," Aggie said when the bird had gone.

"Och, sure, I can bate you easy!" he replied.

"Well, you can give me a start, can't you?"

She smiled at him as she said that, and her smile was so winsome that he had to take hold of her and fondle her. He pressed her so tightly that he hurt her.

"Och, da," she protested, "you're near chokin' me!"

"I'd give the world to please you, Aggie," he said, releasing her and stroking her hair. "I would that, daughter!"

"Well, give me a start of ten, then!" she replied, and she began to throw stones at the rock.

He caught her hand and held it. "I want to talk to you, Aggie," he said. "Sit down a wee while an' listen!"

She threw her stones away, and sat down on the dry rock, and waited for him to begin, but he did not speak at once. He lay down on the shingle at her feet and remained thus, looking out to sea. She tapped his shoulder with her foot. "Hi, da," she said, "have you lost your tongue or what?"

He roused himself and sat up. "Aggie," he said, "are you fond of me!"

"Och, da, of course I'm fond of my da!"

"Aye, but are you fond of *me?* I don't mean are you fond of your da, but are you fond of *me?*"

"That's a quare thing to be askin', da!"

"Aye, it mebbe sounds quare, but sure there's many a person is only fond of their da an' ma because they're their da an' ma, an' mebbe if they foun' out somethin' about them that wasn't nice, they wouldn't be fond of them no more!"

"Ah, sure, that wouldn't make no differs at all, da!"

"It might, Aggie!" He paused for a moment and looked intently at her. "Aggie," he said softly, "I'm quaren fond of you, an' I'm proud of you too, daughter. You wouldn't think I'd get so fond of you, an' me only knowin' you since yesterday, but I never knew I had a child like you, an' I can't hardly make out what's the matter with me since I knew about you. I feel as if I'd go demented mad if you were to turn against me!"

"What would I turn against you for, da?"

"Ah, you might. People might be sayin' things about me, an' makin' me out a bad man. Your uncle Henry an' your aunt Jane mebbe. . . ."

She leant forward and put her arms round his neck, and rubbed her cheek against his beard. "Sure, don't be takin' any notice of her," she said. "Every one knows what my Aunt Jane is like. She has a quare nasty nature, an' would say a thing like that just to annoy you!"

He took hold of her hands and drew her down from the rock so that she was sitting on the shingle

beside him. "Och, well," he said, "it doesn't matter what she says so long as you don't turn bitter against me. I've had a hard life of it, Aggie, so I have. A quare hard life!"

"Have you, da?"

"Aye. I couldn't tell you half the things that's happened to me? . . ."

"Why didn't you come home before this, da?"

He did not reply to her question immediately. He knew that it must be asked some time and that he must answer it, but he could not decide what to say. "I had a roamin' fit on me," he said at last, "an' I wanted to wander the world. Your ma an' me wasn't friends! . . ."

She looked at him in astonishment. "Do you mean my ma an' you had a row?" she asked.

"Aye. Somethin' of the sort. It was over the head of nothin', but we were bitter to each other, an' I went away. I meant to come back soon, but I lost my ship when I was in America. I got into bother there an' I was discharged. . . ."

"Och, da!"

"An' I was out of work a good while, an' hadn't any money, an' couldn't send any to your ma, an' then I just felt ashamed of myself, an' didn't write nor nothin' an' . . . well, that's the way of it. I've had a hard time of it out there, an' me wonderin' many's a time how your ma was gettin' on, an' I kept on sayin' to myself I'd write to her by the next mail, an' I never done it. I just knocked about America, never gettin' regular work or nothin', an' sleepin' out, an' goin' without my meals! . . ."

"Da, dear!" She got up on her knees and embraced him, and he felt her cheeks wet against his.

"Don't be cryin' about me, Aggie. Sure, I'm not worth it," he said.

"You are, da, you are!"

"I was hungry many's a time! . . ."

"An' us with plenty!"

He laughed and nodded his head. "Aye, indeed," he said, "that's the cod of it. Me starvin' away in America, an' my childer an' wife well off here. . . . Then I made up my mind to come home. I worked my passage over on a cattle-boat, Aggie. I can tell you it was rough crossin' in an ould boat that might 'a' gone to the bottom any minute, an' the cows sick with fear when the sea rolled over the side of the ship. Many's a time I had to get up in the dark to look after them when the sea was as high as the Cave Hill, an' I had to cling on to the mast for fear I'd be washed overboard. I was near dead with tiredness when we got to Liverpool!"

"Poor da!"

He told her what he had already told his wife, how he had been hidden in the stoke-hole of a cross-channel steamer, and had walked from Belfast to Ballyreagh, losing his way on the Hollywood Hills.

"I was wore out," he added, "when I reached the house, an' I wasn't sure whether it was it nor not. Your ma might 'a' moved to a different house or might 'a' left Ballyreagh althegether for all I knew!"

The thought of what his fate would have been had his family not been where he expected to find

it overcame her, and she did not speak. She sat with misty eyes, holding his hand and hers until the sun's rays began to fade out of the sky, and the golden fleeces of the clouds turned grey in the sky, and the sunlight faded off the sea and left it cold and the colour of steel. The grey clouds became darker in tone until they seemed to be black.

"We'd better be goin' home," he said to her, rising up from the shingle and holding out his hand to help her to rise, too.

"Aye, da!" she replied.

They climbed up the face of the cliff and walked across the field to the road.

"You'll always be fond of me, Aggie?" he said, as they came on to the road.

"Aye, da, indeed I will!"

They hurried down the road together. The daylight had not yet gone, and they could see passers-by looking curiously at them. Aggie's eyes brightened as she heard neighbours say to each other loudly enough to be heard, "That's Mrs. Martin's man over there with Aggie—him that was thought to be drowned!" Once she was made angry by what she heard. A woman answered her companion and said, "For dear sake, is that him? Well, I don't think much of the look of him!" Her lips tightened, and for a moment or two she thought wildly of running after her father's detractor. She had a notion of beating her until she howled for pity and confessed her error. . . . She restrained her anger, and said to herself that the woman was ignorant, anyway, and then she began to cast about in her

mind for some discreditable thing to remember of her. . . . She pressed her father's arm gently, and hoped that he had not heard what had been said. She looked sideways at him to see the expression on his face, but if he had heard, he showed no sign of having done so, and she imagined that he had not, and was comforted.

As they came down the steep part of the road, they met an old man who stopped them and shook hands heartily with James.

"It's Andra' Macalister, da!" Aggie said to her father.

"Och, aye, I mind him rightly," he answered. "How're you, sir!"

The old man did not hear his inquiry. "Sure, it's right an' glad I am to see you again," he said. "Right an' glad I am!" He turned to Aggie and held out a trembling hand to her. "I mind your da, well, daughter," he said, "when you weren't thought of at all. Aye, I do that. Right an' well I do. He was a big strappin' fella, then . . . but sure, it's troublesome times he's come back to!"

"How's that, Andra'?" James inquired indulgently.

"Ah, now, you'll know all about it in a wee while. It's a troublesome time surely. Aye! Didn't you hear about the Home Rule Bill where you were? Ah, man-a-dear, that's the great trouble to the country. It's awful, so it is!" He let a great sigh out of him as he said this.

"Them Cathliks havin' the upper han' of good Prodesans! Ah, man, James Martin, that's terrible! Ah, it is! It's a good job I'm as ould as I am,

an' 'll soon be out of al this. It is indeed! Aye! I couldn't thole to live in it. The priests'll be drivin' the people to Mass every Sunday. They will for certain. An' be makin' them say their prayers to the Virgin Mary. That's what they'll be doin'! But I'm right an' glad to see you all the same, James Martin. I am, indeed!"

"It's nice an' kind of you to say that, Andra'! Isn't it, Aggie?" James Martin said, turning to his daughter.

"Aye, it is, da. He's the right ould fella, Andra' is!" she answered.

The old man mumbled for a moment. "Aye," he said. "She's a brave lump of a girl, that, you have James Martin. Aye! But I'm ould, daughter, that's what I am. If I was young again it 'ud be different, I'm tellin' you. The young lads nowadays doesn't think nothin' of Home Rule. Not a one of them cares a thrush's mick about it. That's the truth I'm tellin' you, as sure as you're stan'in' there. It's despert, it is! despert! an' I don't know what to think of it all. I'm ould, an' I'm not near myself. . . . I'm right an' glad to see you lookin' so hearty on it, an' I hope you'll always have your health, but I wish the times wasn't so troublesome. I do in sang!"

"Och, they're not so bad, Andra'!" said Aggie to console him.

"Ah, daughter, they are! They are, indeed. It's the poor home-comin' for your da to be made turn a Cathlik by Home Rulers, an' him havin' to bless himself with Holy Water, an' say his prayers to the Virgin Mary, an' mebbe kissin' the Pope's toe the way ould Gladstone done.

He did, indeed, daughter! I saw it one time myself on a picter. Right down on his bended knees he was, kissin' the ould Pope's toe.... Ah, well, I'll not be keepin' you no longer from your tay. I'm right an' glad to see you whatever the times is like, an' I hope you'll have your health. . . Good-night to you, daughter, an' tell your da!"

He stumped away without finishing his sentence, a frail old fellow, cherishing ancient rages in his narrow mind. He tottered along until he reached a corner where a light wind blew about him, and held him so that he could not move. They stood and watched him as he tried to force his way against the wind, and they saw him, when it had blown past him, walking like a child that is learning to stand upon its legs, half-running, half-tumbling down the road.

"He'll be blamin' the Pope for that," said James Martin, as they resumed their walk.

"Och, poor ould lad," exclaimed Aggie, "he's away in the mind!"

"I thought he was by the way he was talkin'. . . Your ma'll be wonderin' where we are, an' we'll be late for our tay!"

"Ah, sure that doesn't matter, da!" Aggie answered, pressing his arm and snuggling up to him.

CHAPTER XV

THE injury to Jamesey's head was less severe than had at first been imagined, but he did not go to Belfast on Monday. On Sunday night, the Reverend William Haveron, accompanied again by Henry Mahaffy and his wife, had returned to the house to inquire about Esther. They went away discomfited when they were told that Esther had quitted her sister's home before they had paid their first visit. Jane Mahaffy laughed when she heard that Esther had gone, and she turned to the minister and said she was glad he was to be spared the misery of saving her from herself. "She's took my words to heart," she added. "When I heard that James was comin' home again, I bid her look after herself, an' not be bringin' disgrace on her family again!"

When she had said that, Mrs. Martin requested her to go away immediately. "I don't want to say nothin' hard to you, Jane," she said, "though dear knows you make it difficult to keep a sweet tongue! Just go now, an' don't be comin' here again like a good woman. You can do your clash-baggin' somewhere else—it doesn't matter to me where you do it, so long as you don't come in my light. It's a pity of you, an' I'm sore an' sorry for you, but I can't be always mindin' the pity

it is of you, an' I wouldn't like to forget myself ! . . ."

" Well, you've a good nerve on you, Martha ! " Jane Mahaffy said as she went out of the house, following her husband and the minister, " but mebbe you've need of it, for your man, by the look of him'll not be much comfort to you, an' if it's not Esther this time, it'll likely be some one else ! "

Jamesey found it difficult to like his father, who had now been at home for a week. Hitherto Jamesey had been the man of the family, receiving the devotion of his sister and his Aunt Esther and also, though it was not so freely demonstrated, of his mother. He resented his deposition from his proud place as the man in the house. His father had the chief seat now at the table and was the first to be served with food. Aggie became more and more attached to him ; she continually talked of her da. . . . Mrs. Martin had taken him to Mick McKie, the tailor, and had had him rigged out in new clothes. . . . If Jamesey had been asked whether or not he was jealous of his father, he would have said he was not, and would have believed it. Why, indeed, should he mind his father being clad in a decent suit, or Aggie offering her devotion to him ? But . . . and then his Aunt Esther had mysteriously gone away from the house the very next morning after his father's return to it. Why had she gone ? Why were his Uncle Henry and his Aunt Jane and the minister making inquiries about her ? What had she done that they should try to harass her so ? Where, too, had his father been all the time ? Why had he remained away from home so long ?

"It's a quare set-out, whatever it is?" he said to himself, as he ruminated on the subject. "I wish he'd stayed where he was!"

He had asked his mother what his father intended to do, now that he was at home, but his mother had put him off by telling him that he must give his father time to look about him. "He's not rightly settled yet!" she said. "It'll take a wee while to get used to things!"

"I believe he left her!" he said to himself. "I believe that's what he done. It couldn't be nothin' else, only she'll not admit it. I don't like the look of him, nor the way he sits there smokin' his pipe, an' not doin' a han's turn, like a gentleman, an' Aggie an' my ma waitin' on him! If I was to be livin' here, I'd have a quare ould row with him, so I would. I wish I could see my Aunt Esther! . . ."

He resolved that he would go over and see his aunt at once. "I'll ask her about my da when I see her," he said.

He dressed himself for the road, and told his mother that he was going to see his Aunt Esther at Millisle.

"Aye, son, do," she replied. "An' you can talk to her about settin' up for herself in Belfast, an' you lodgin' with her. Tell her I was askin' after her!"

"Yes, ma!"

"An' don't be tirin' yourself out!"

"No. Where's my da?"

"He's out a walk somewhere. Aggie's down at the shop by herself. When I've got the dinner cleared up, I'll go down there, too, so if you're not

late, you'd better come there instead of here when you come back ! "

He kissed her and went out.

It was not long before he reached Millisle and the Cathers' house. Mr. Cather was sitting at the door, hammering leather, when Jamesey came up to the house, and greeted him.

" Och, Jamesey, is that you ? " he said. " Are you come to see your aunt ? "

" Aye, I am, Mr. Cather. Is she in ? "

" She's somewhere about. I'll just give her a call ! " He shouted into the cottage, " Hi, Esther, you're wanted ! " and then returned to his seat. " This is great news about your da," he said, " an' how is he at all ? "

" Ah, he's rightly ! "

" That's good ! That's good ! You'll be right an' glad to see him, I suppose ? "

" Aye, I daresay ! "

Esther came to the door as he spoke. " It's you, Jamesey ! " she said. She saw the cut on his forehead. " Oh, dear," she exclaimed, " how did you get that ? "

" I fell," he replied.

" Were you much hurted ? "

" Ah, no ! " .

Mr. Cather looked up at him as he said this. " I was wonderin' myself how you got it," he said, " only I didn't like to ask for fear you mightn't want to tell me."

" Ah, sure it's nothin' at all," Jamesey exclaimed. " Are you busy, Aunt Esther ? I wanted to have a bit of a crack with you ! "

" I'm not busy at all, Jamesey. Will we go down to the shore for a while ! "

" Aye, if you like ! "

She took off her apron, and tidied herself to go out with him. " I'll not be long, Mr. Cather ! " she said. " Will you tell Maggie when she comes back ? "

" Right you are," Mr. Cather answered. " You'd better be bringin' Jamesey back to his tay with us ! "

" Ah, I couldn't trouble you, Mr. Cather, thank you all the same ! " Jamesey said.

" It's no trouble at all, Jamesey, to be givin' a person a cup of tay an' a bite to ate ! You'll come back now when you're ready ! An' mebbe I'll have a surprise for you when you do come ! "

" What sort of a surprise, Mr. Cather ? "

" Ah, now, a surprise that'll please you. There's been some one askin' after you, an' quaren disappointed she was when she didn't see you Sunday ! "

" Och, her ! " Jamesey said. His voice indicated that he had lost interest in the girl on whom he had said he was doting. " Is she stoppin' with you ? " he added.

" No, she's not stoppin' with us. She's stoppin' with Mrs. McKittrick at the end of the long field. I thought you were quarely taken with her, Jamesey ? "

" So I was, but I'm not thinkin' of her this minute. I'll see you later," he said, as he strolled off with his aunt.

She thought to herself how like his father he was. James Martin had been off-hand too in his treatment of women. She wondered whether Jamesey would ever treat a girl as his father had

treated her. "How is all at home, Jamesey?" she said.

"They're brave an' rightly," he answered. "My ma was askin' after you."

"Was she, Jamesey?"

"Aye!"

They did not speak again until they reached the shore, and then they sat down and talked of her project to go to Belfast.

"I'd like it quaren well, Aunt Esther!" he said, "if you were to come up to the town. There's plenty of places where you could do well for yourself, an' I could always lend you a hand if you were needin' it!"

"I'll go up the morrow," she replied, "an' have a look roun' for a likely place. That wee girl you were talkin' about, Annie Macartney, says there's a grand place on the Albertbridge Road that the people's thinkin' o' sellin'. It 'ud mebbe be better for me to take a shop that's started already nor to be openin' a new one an' havin' to build up a trade. I daresay they'll want a lot for the good-will!"

"I daresay!"

He picked up a pebble and threw it carelessly towards the sea. She saw that he was not listening to her very attentively.

"What's in your mind, Jamesey?" she said.

"I was thinkin' about my da," he replied.

"Your da?"

"Aye. I was wonderin' did he run away an' desert my ma, or what!"

She, too, had been wondering why James had gone away. "Och, Jamesey," she said, "you shouldn't be thinkin' the like of that!"

"Why shouldn't I? Isn't it natural to think it? A man doesn't leave his wife an' childer for nothin', does he?"

"No."

He took a paper packet of cigarettes out of his pocket, and began to smoke one of them. "You smoke too many of them things, Jamesey," she said to him. He did not make any response to her remark, but sat with his hands clasped round his knees and blew little blue spirals of smoke up into the air.

"That's a big boat over there," his aunt said, pointing to the sky-line against which a great liner could be seen.

He nodded his head, but did not speak.

"The Cathers have been very kind to me," she continued. "They're nice-natured people, the whole of them!" She wondered what thoughts were in his mind, but she was afraid to ask him to tell her, although she could not tell why she was afraid. "Is Aggie all right?" she said.

"She's all right!" he answered, taking the cigarette from his lips and flicking the ash off the end of it.

"How did you get that cut? . . ."

"Och, I told you, didn't I? I fell!"

"What made you fall?"

"My da!"

"Your da! . . ." She sat still for a second or two, and then she caught hold of him by the arm. "He never struck you, did he?"

"Aye, he did, indeed. He me hit a welt on the jaw an' knocked me spinnin' on the floor!"

"But! . . ." She got no further. She re-

linquished her hold on his arm, and sat back in her place, and cried.

"It's no good cryin'," he said. "He let out at me without thinkin'. My Uncle Henry put him in a temper, him an' the minister an' my Aunt Jane!"

Esther wiped the tears from her cheek and sat up. "The minister," she said. "What minister?

"Mr. Haveron!"

"What was he doin' in the house?"

"I don't know. He come to find out where you were."

"Me!"

"Aye!"

She thought for awhile. Her tears ceased to flow, and her mind began to work quickly. "What were they wantin' with me?" she asked.

"They never said!"

She sighed with relief.

"What were they wantin', Aunt Esther?" Jamesey asked her, turning to her suddenly.

"How would I know?"

"They were sayin' quare things about you!..."

She made a movement of alarm when she heard him say this. "What things were they sayin'?" she asked quickly.

"It was my Aunt Jane!..."

"Och, sure, you wouldn't take any notice of what she would be sayin', Jamesey!"

"She said she hoped there wouldn't be any more bother between you an' my da!"

"She said that, did she?"

"Aye. She brought the minister with her to talk to you."

"Did your ma say anything?"

"She ordered her out of the house!"

Esther laughed and clapped her hands. "That was right," she said. "That was the way to treat the ould terge! Your ma done right, Jamesey! What did your da say?"

"He was losin' his temper with them. The minister said he'd come to save you from hell, an' my da was goin' to strike him, an' I come between them, an' toul' him he should mind what he was doin', an' with that he turned roun' sudden an' caught me a coup on the face that sent me rowlin' on the floor! . . ."

"Ah, Jamesey, son!" She caught him and kissed him passionately. "It was a hard thing to be doin', the like of that, to his own son!"

"If I hadn't been near stunned, I'd 'a' hit him back, an' I wouldn't like to think I done the like of that to my own da!"

"No, son!"

"It was quare talk that for the minister to be talkin', about savin' you from hell, Aunt Esther. What made him say it?"

"Och, he's an ould footer of a man, don't you know, Jamesey? I wouldn't let on I heard him if I were you!"

"Had you an' my da words before he went away?"

"Words?"

"Aye, but sure you never said anything about rows with him, so I suppose you hadn't. You would near think from the way my Aunt Jane was hintin' an' insinuatin' that you an' my da! . . ."

She laid her hand on his sleeve. "What was that callin' ?" she said hurriedly.

He listened, "I can't hear nothin'," he said. "What was it you heard ?"

"Mebbe it was a bird. We'd better be goin' now, son. It's cold sittin' here in the wind off the sea. Give me your hand an' help me up !"

He did not move. "Ah, you're in no hurry yet awhile," he said. "It's not cold at all !"

"I'm shiverin'," she said, getting on to her knees.

"You don't look cold, Aunt Esther !"

"Mebbe I don't, but I am !" She got up as she spoke, and held her hand out to him. "Come on," she said.

He got up as she bid him, and stood beside her. "Let's go for a dandher along the shore," he suggested. "You'll get warm that way, an' we can talk a while !"

"It's rough walkin' on the stones," she said.

He became impatient with her. "You would think you were an ould Jenny-Joe," he said, "the way you're goin' on. Sure, the stones'll do you no harm, an' you used to walkin' on them many's a time. Come on er that with you !"

She realized that she must do as he asked her, and she submitted to his will. She was afraid of what was in front of her, but she felt that she must stand before it. What would Jamesey say to her when he learned the truth ? Would he turn from her and treat her as a bad woman ? Was she to lose the son's love as well as the father's? Perhaps he would not consent to live with her in Belfast when he learned of her conduct with his

father in the days before he had gone away from home. She had no feeling for the father now. She was ceasing even to have hate for him. But she loved Jamesey all the more because of the frightful disaster that had happened to her dreams and desires about his father. She did not feel that she could bear to have the boy turn from her as the father had done . . . but although she desired to keep his love, she felt that now she must run the risk of losing it. Thoughts were in his mind that would never be quelled. He must be told lest he should let suspicion grow and grow in his mind until it became a blacker thing than truth. . . .

"Very well, Jamesey," she said, and she took hold of his arm and walked by his side.

She need not tell all. She need not tell him that she had filled her mind and heart with longing for his father from the day he went away until the day he came back. She need not tell him that had his father returned to her in something of the shape of the man he had been when he went away, she would have been his woman again. . . . It was odd that James had come back without a thought for her. Why had he lost his love for her? Why had he stayed away when he might have had her whenever he wanted her? He had loved her when he went away, of that she felt assured, even though he had not turned to wave farewell to her that morning when she had stood at the window and watched him carry his bundle up the street as he went to the railway station. . . . Some living thing stirred in her mind, something came to life at that moment in her mind, and

moved . . . and suddenly she understood that James had ceased to love her before he set his foot on the ship that took him away sixteen years ago. Now, indeed, was she a lonely woman, deprived of the consolation of memory. She had spent long years waiting in hope for a man who had vanished out of the world—for this James was not that James ; and she had spent those long years in loving a man who had lost his love for her. He had not turned to throw a caress to her that day because he had ceased to desire her caresses. He had had his time with her, and was satisfied : he had no wish for more of her company. . . . God is hard on them that offend Him. She felt that He had punished her too severely. Indeed, she had acted abominably and had been prepared to act still more abominably—paying for love with wrong, offering treachery for trust, returning evil for kindness ; but however black her thoughts had been to Martha, this penalty she now had to pay was too great. If Martha had been injured, Martha was now revenged. . . . It seemed to her at that moment that she had walked suddenly into a place of desolation, that she was shut away from sunlight and starlight and the round radiance of the moon ; that in this dreadful region of lost illusions, the enlivening tang of the sea and the hearty buffet of the wind and the lovely smell of earth and ocean and burning things on soil were changed to a horrible air of seclusion and death. She knew that Jamesey was somewhere near her, but she could not see him ; she knew that overhead there were birds flying, whirling and diving and spinning up and down, and calling to each other in ecstasy—

but she could not see them; she knew that she was stumbling over stones on the shore, and that the waves were running in and out among the rocks, lifting the yellow sea-weed in a soft heaving motion or pitching it violently aside, and then letting it fall, wet and dripping, on the rocks—but she could not see them. The world was near her—but a great screen hid it from her eyes. . . .

She put out her hands and tried to catch at something, but it slipped from her grasp. She called out "Jamesey, Jamesey!" and she heard him saying, "What ails you, Aunt Esther? Are you sick or what?" and then she fell and fell and fell. . .

"I'm all right, son!" she said when she came back to the world. She was lying on the shingle with her back against a rock, and Jamesey was looking anxiously at her. "I'm all right, Jamesey, son!" she said, smiling at him and patting his hand. "You needn't get afeard about me!"

"You just turned as white as a sheet," he said, "and shouted to me although I was standin' beside you, an' then you tumbled down in a heap, an' my heart was in my mouth, for I daren't leave you, an' no one come next or near us! . . ."

"Och, son!"

"What ailed you at all? Were you feelin' bad or what?"

She nodded her head. "Aye, Jamesey," she said, "I was feelin' bad—quaren bad! You needn't be upsettin' yourself, but! I'm all right again! Sit down here beside me til I tell you somethin'!"

She moved the pebbles away so that he could

sit on sand, and pulled him down beside her. She took his hand in hers and drew him to her so that his head rested on her shoulder. "Jamesey, son," she said, "you know the way I love you, don't you?"

"Aye, Aunt Esther," he replied, "I do, an' I love you, too!"

"Do you, son?"

"You know rightly I do, don't you?"

"Aye, I know you do. I've loved you ever since you were born, Jamesey. I nursed you when you were a wean, an' took care of you when your ma was havin' your sister Esther that died when she was a child, an' took care of you when she was havin' Aggie, an' loved you every minute of your life. I was more proud of you nor if you were my own child!"

"I know you were, Aunt Esther!"

"An' I love you this minute, Jamesey, more nor I ever loved you, but mebbe when you hear what I'm goin' to tell you you'll never love me again!"

"Sure, I couldn't help lovin' you! . . ."

"There's things makes love into hate in a sudden, Jamesey, an' it doesn't matter how much you're carin' for a person, if one of them things comes into your life, it'll destroy all your love like a flash of lightnin', an' leave your heart scalded with hate. An' mebbe it'll be that way with you when you hear what I'm goin' to say; but if you never speak to me again, I'll love you, Jamesey, as long as I live!" She put her arms about him and kissed him. "As long as ever I live, Jamesey!"

She did not speak again, but sat with her arms

folded about him, and her chin resting on his head. He moved a little, and said to her, "What are you goin' to tell me, Aunt Esther?"

"Wait a wee while, Jamesey," she said. "I want to hold you like this, for mebbe it'll be! . . ."

She broke off sharply, and he lay still in her arms, wondering what she had to say to him, and not suspecting that her story had relation to the hints and suggestions that had been made by his Aunt Jane and the minister. He had forgotten those things in his alarm at his Aunt Esther's faintness—and this passionate show of love for him kept them still out of his mind. He watched the sea rolling in, and found himself wondering at the clearness of the waves that came over the tops of the rocks and fell on to the sandy beach and then rolled on slowly becoming thin and more thin until they sank into the sand with a boiling noise. . . .

"Jamesey," he heard his aunt say at last, "I was your da's fancy woman before he went away!"

It seemed to him so absurd that she should be saying that, and he hardly listened. A great wave came dashing up over the rocks, battering and splashing and throwing up white drops of shiny water, and tearing sea-weed from its hold and flinging it into deep pools where tiny green crabs scurried away into the shelter of a crevice. "That was the quare big wave," he said.

"Jamesey, son," she said, "are you heedin' me?"

"Aye, aunt!"

"Did you hear what I said? . . ."

And then he knew. He sat up quickly and

turned so that he was resting on his palms. He felt a stone sticking into his right hand, and he shifted his body so that he should avoid it.

"You were! . . ."

She looked at him steadily and nodded her head. Some purifying thing kept her from lowering her eyes or crying. She had to hold her head up and look into his eyes without flinching.

"Aye," she said, "I was!"

"My God!"

They remained thus, gazing into each other's eyes, and did not speak for a long time. Then Jamesey rose and walked away from her. He climbed up on the rocks and scrambled over them until he came to the edge of the sea. The waves splashed over his feet, but he did not heed them. He stood on a patch of sea-weed, and heard a bulb burst under his feet. He kicked a limpet from the rock and it fell into the water, its yellow body turning white as it sank down into the long tassels streaming upwards from the bottom of the sea.

Esther called to him, but he did not answer. She called to him again, but still he did not reply; and then she, too, climbed up on to the rocks, scraping her hands on the barnacles so that they bled, and slipped about on the wet sea-weed until she reached his side. A wave rolled up and drenched them both about the ankles.

"Jamesey," she said, not daring to call him "son," "come home. You're drippin' wet, an' you'll get your death if you stan' here any longer. Come on home with me!"

He did as she bid him without speaking. They stumbled on the sharp points of the rocks, and

once her leg slipped on the sea-weed and went into a deep pool in a hole. He took hold of her hand and helped her to climb the rest of the way until they came to the sand and the shingle, and then she jumped down without assistance. They went back the way they had come, but neither of them spoke. They passed over the field that divided the sea from the road, and then walked along the road to the lane which led to the Cathers' cottage. A farmer drove by in his cart, and called "That's a brave evenin'!" to them, and they nodded their heads and passed on. They could hear the rumble of his cart-wheels and the squelching sound of their boots as the sea-water oozed out of them, and the distant thump of the waves on the rocks below.

"They'll have had their tay," said Esther, when they came to the lane.

Jamesey did not answer, nor did he turn up the lane with her. She stood still and watched him as he strode on towards Ballyreagh. "Jamesey," she called after him, but he did not look round. She waited for a while as if she hoped that he would come back to her, but he did not do so, though she called to him again, and then, letting a cry of pain out of her, she ran after him, and when she came up to him, she stood in front of him and put her arms round his neck, and pulled his face down to her and kissed him. "Son, son!" she said, "don't be goin' away like that without a word to me!"

He did not resist her.

"You know I love you, son," she said, "an' you said yourself you loved me, an' wouldn't let

nothin' come atween us. I'm nothin' to your da now! . . ." She felt a shudder go through him at the mention of his father. "Indeed an' 'deed I'm not," she said, clinging to him. "You'll not go away from me, Jamesey, an' never let me see you again. You said you'd come an' stop with me in Belfast, an' you will, son, you will, won't you? I'll do anything for you, only don't be castin' me off. I've suffered, son, for what I done, an'! . . ." Her sobs prevented her from speaking further. She hung on to him, with her head resting on his breast, and he felt her body shaking with grief. He looked down on her, and wondered to himself that he had not noticed before how many grey hairs she had. A great feeling of pity for her came into his heart, and he bent his head and kissed her hair.

She looked up instantly, though she could hardly see him because of the tears that were streaming from her eyes. "You'll not turn me away, son?" she said pleadingly, and he kissed her lips, and then freed himself from her clasp.

"I'm all throughother," he said, putting her gently from him. "Give me time to think about it," he said.

"Will you not come back with me now?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No," he replied, "I don't want to be with no one yet awhile. I just want to be by myself. Go on, you, Aunt Esther, an' leave me to myself. It'll be better for me to be alone!"

"You'll not be broodin', Jamesey? . . ."

He did not answer. He walked along the road,

while she stood there watching him until he was out of sight. Some one passed him on the road and called a greeting to him, but he neither saw the friend nor answered him. The day was closing in, and the sun moved down the sky towards the rim of hills in the west, and as it made its journey it sent out great shafts of light that shot up into the heavens and down into the fields and the sea, transfusing the clouds so that they looked like balls of grey smoke with pink edges, and causing the hills to clothe themselves in coats of many colours, ruddy brown like burnt sienna, golden like corn, amethyst like heather, changing, as the sunlight shifted, to dark masses that could not be defined. The sea was green one moment and golden another, and where the wind blew there was a great splash of silver, and the little crinkled waves looked like the ruffled feathers of a bird. The round, red rim of the sun poised for a moment or two on the top of the hills, making flames of the clouds, and then it tumbled out of sight, and the red clouds became the colour of dying embers, and the pale, yellow clouds became smoky and dark, and the hills lost their shiny look and became black, and the night settled down like a great bird over her brood. A nightjar rose noisily from a tree, and a curlew flew overhead with a long, hard cry. As Jamesey stumbled past a house on the roadside a dog yelped at him, and a woman called to it from the dusky porch. He could see the lights of a house before him, shining like little lost stars, and looking towards the ocean, he saw the weary sea-birds floating back to land.

"Oh, my God," he cried, as he stumbled home.

CHAPTER XVI

He had gone home in a fury, determined to haul his father from the house and beat him out of the town, but when he had entered the kitchen, and had found the business of the home going quietly on, his will failed him. His father sat before the fire, smoking his pipe and reading the *Belfast Evening Telegraph*, while Aggie finished her supper at the table under the stairs. It was Aggie, now, who had care of the shop, for his mother, since his Aunt Esther had quitted the house, had stayed at home to make the meals and attend to the home affairs. His father often went down to the shop to help Aggie, and it seemed that he might regularly do so. When the barrel of paraffin oil was empty, and a new one had to be tapped, James Martin did it. Until his home-coming that had been Jamesey's job at the week-end; but his father took it without a word, and Aggie liked to have him near her. Sometimes a person living in a big house, or some one from the Squire's family, would order goods to be delivered. In the old days Mrs. Martin had given two-pence to a village boy or to Johnnie-look-up-at-the-moon, the half-wit, to carry the articles to their destination; but now James Martin became the porter and errand-boy because Aggie had

laughed at him for doing nothing. He was sitting now at ease in the way of a man who had done his work and is content. He looked up at Jamesey as he entered the house, but did not smile or greet him. He seemed to be indifferent to Jamesey. He seldom spoke to him and never gave a sign of affection to him; and the memory of the blow he lately dealt him was too recent to make friendship easy. Mrs. Martin had been darning socks when Jamesey entered, but when she heard that he had not had his tea she put them aside and busied herself preparing a meal for him. How had he left his Aunt Esther? Was she well in herself? Did she say anything about going up to Belfast?

She looked rightly. She did say something about going up to Belfast, but he didn't listen very attentively—something about taking a shop and him going and living with her. . . . He saw his father listen while he spoke. Aye, he might well listen! He had a good mind to say something now . . . only how could he say anything when they were all so quiet together? He would have to wait until he got a chance of checking his father. You can't make a quarrel in a house where no one is angry but yourself, and your own anger has fallen out of you unaccountably. He couldn't work up a rage against his father: he must wait until the flame of some anger had kindled in him, and then. . . .

His mother was eager that he should do what his Aunt Esther desired him to do.

"It'll be company for the pair of you," she said, "an' it'll be better for you to be lodgin'

with her, an' her so fond of you, nor to be lodgin' with strangers ! "

He nodded his head, but did not speak. He ate his supper in silence, and then sat still in his chair thinking over the things he had learned that day until his mother asked him what his thoughts were.

" Nothin' ! " he replied.

She looked at him inquiringly, but did not ask what was his trouble. She associated his silence with the blow he had had from his father, and she knew that it was of no use to try and destroy the constraint between him and her husband : it must die naturally. So she went on with her work of darning, and let him sit at the supper-table brooding. But he did not brood for a long time. He could not sit still. He wanted to talk and shout, to do something loud and hard to keep his mind still. He fidgeted in his chair, and when he was tired of turning this way and that, he got up and went across the kitchen to the window-seat and stretched himself full length on it ; but he could not be easy there either. He sat up again, and then lay down a second time.

" You're quaren restless the night, Jamesey ! " his mother said with some rebuke in her tone. " You'll disturb you da readin' the paper ! "

Disturb his da ! What did it matter whether he did or not ? Who was his da ? . . . But that was to be the way of it ! " Jamesey, don't be restless for fear you disturb your da ! . . ." Why had his da not made some remark so that he could answer it bitterly ? Why had his da not looked

up and said, "Aye, keep quiet, Jamesey!" so that he could turn on him and say, "To hell er that with you!"? . . . But his father did not even look up. He went on reading the paper as if he had not heard a word.

"What ails you, son?" his mother said, coming to his side, and fondling him. "You're not sick, are you, again?"

He got up from the seat and eluded her embrace. "No, ma," he replied. "I'm all right. Don't bother your head about me!"

Aggie had cleared the plates from the table and returned to the kitchen as he spoke. "Aggie," he said, "come on out for a dandher with me. We'll go up to the Lighthouse! . . ."

"Ah, Jamesey," she said, "I can't. Me an' my da's goin' to have a game of draughts when he's done the paper! . . ."

She would have come gladly any time he had asked her in the days before his father's return. He was not to fidget lest he should disturb his father in his reading of the newspaper. He had not seen the paper himself yet. . . . He must do without Aggie's company because his father needed it. . . . There was no one now. His Aunt Esther was at Millisle—and even she had been given to his father. Was he to have nothing? He had his mother's love, he knew, but they all had that . . . and his father was now receiving the little considerations that formerly were his. Did they know what sort of man his father was? Aggie did not know, but did his mother know? She might suspect, she must suspect, but did she *know?* If she knew, how could she endure to have

him in the house? . . . And she had allowed his Aunt Esther to stay with her all these years! That was a quare thing! . . .

He went to bed. "Good-night, ma!" he said suddenly, and leaning over her shoulder he kissed her. "Good-night, Aggie!" he added, nodding his head to her, and then he went towards the stairs.

"You've not said 'Good-night' to my da!" Aggie exclaimed.

He went up the stairs with a scowl on his face. "Good-night!" he said, and his father, without looking up, replied, "'Night to you!"

He stripped himself and got into his bed where he lay a long time awake. He began to feel ashamed of himself. He had pelted down the Millisle Road determined to avenge his mother on his father, but he had not done or said anything; and now he was lying in bed saying to himself the things he had meant to say to his father. . . . Anyway, he would not have anything more to do with his Aunt Esther. She could go and start her ould shop where she liked, and get whom she liked to lodge with her, but he would have no share in the shop. There would not be much of a home for him after this in Ballyreagh. How could be continue to come here on Saturdays, knowing that his father would be here, too, and that Aggie. . . . Aggie was a nice one! Leaving him in the lurch like that! And him always been a good brother to her, too! Playing draughts with her da! . . . Damn her da! . . . He'd leave the lot of them! He'd be sorry to leave his ma, but if she kept his da on in the house, that was what he would have to do! . . .

While he was brooding thus he heard his mother's steps on the stairs, and then she opened his door. He lay very quietly and did not answer when she said, "Are you awake, Jamesey?" She came into the room, shading the candlelight from his eyes, and bent over him as he lay in bed. He kept his eyes closed and pretended to be asleep. He wondered what she wanted and determined to open his eyes and pretend that he had suddenly awoke, but something prevented him from doing so. He breathed heavily and turned over on his side in the pretence that he was turning in his sleep; and when he had snuggled into the new place he had made for himself in the bed and was still again, she bent over him and kissed his forehead very lightly. Then she went softly out of the room, still shading the candle from his eyes. He sat up in bed when she shut the door, and opened his mouth to call to her . . . and then he lay down again without speaking. . . .

In the morning he went to Belfast. He felt that he could not remain at home while his mind was still disturbed. Dr. McMeekan had said that he was not to return to work for another week, and his mother, when she heard of his intention to travel to Belfast that morning, reminded him of what the doctor had said, and urged him to remain in Ballyreagh.

"You'll be comfortabler here nor there," she said to persuade him.

But he had made his decision and would not withdraw it, and so he went away. While he was in the train he felt exalted by his flight from his father's presence, but his spirits fell when he

reached Belfast. The day was grey, and there was a drizzling rain falling when he arrived. He had given up his labour of thinking and thinking as he approached the city, and had contented himself with looking idly out of the carriage window. "Your da's a bad man an' your aunt Esther's a bad woman!" was the phrase that recurred in his brain as he sat in the corner of the carriage looking out on the slum that lines the railway track from Bloomfield to the terminus in Belfast. "An' your ma doesn't say nothin'!" seemed to come out of the noise of the revolving wheels. "Them houses is despert dirty-lookin'!" he said aloud in the middle of his recurring thoughts as the train passed by the back of Island Street, and a farmer's wife in the carriage turned to him and said, "Beg your pardon!"

"Ah, nothin'," he replied. "I was just thinkin' to myself!"

It was odd, he thought, that he had never before noticed the miserable look of those houses. He had travelled that way every week for several years, but it had not occurred to him that the houses were unfit for anything but destruction. "I'm not near myself," he thought to himself in explanation of his sudden perception. There was a poorly painted picture of King William the Third on the back of one of the houses. . . . He emembered that there was an agitation against Home Rule. "They're makin' a quare cod of theirselves!" he murmured, and then he began to laugh aloud, for a workman had scrawled in whitewash on his wall, against a bedroom window:

OUR TRUST IS IN GOD

and underneath in chalk :

TO HELL WITH THE POPE

The farmer's wife glanced nervously at him, and he realized that she must be full of wonder at the strangeness of his conduct. " Beg your pardon, mem," he said. " I didn't mean to trouble you. I've had a bit of bother, an' I was thinkin' about one thing an' another ! "

" Ah, sure, it's all right," she answered in the tone of one who is trying to humour a distraught person. " It's a soft day ! "

" Aye, it is that, an' it doesn't look like turnin' fine. It'll mebbe rain the whole day ! . . ."

The train drew up at the platform, and the woman hurriedly prepared to leave the carriage. " I wouldn't wonder ! " she said, as she descended from it.

He waited for a few moments to allow her to get ahead of him. " That ould woman thinks I'm away in the mind," he said to himself, as he left the train.

He crossed the Lagan in the Ferry boat, and walked up High Street to Castle Junction, smiling to himself at the alarm of the farmer's wife ; but when he had climbed on to the electric car, and was riding along Royal Avenue and Donegall Street towards the Antrim Road where his lodgings were, his smile ceased, and his mind was full again of the phrases that had beaten through it while he was in the train. " Your da's a bad man, an' your Aunt Esther's a bad woman, an'

your ma doesn't say nothin'!" He could not bear the torture of it, and so he descended from the tramcar at the chapel in Donegall Street. "It'll mebbe stop," he said to himself, "if I walk the length of the lodgin's!" But it would not stop. He leant for a moment or two against the railings of the Orange Hall in Clifton Street, and looked about him with appealing eyes. "Are you not well, son?" a woman, wearing a shawl about her head, said to him. "I'm rightly, thank you, mem!" he answered quickly, and then walked on his way. He crossed the road at Carlisle Circus, and was almost knocked down by a tramcar coming from the Crumlin Road. "Why the hell don't you look where you're goin', you gumph you!" the angry and startled driver shouted at him. He did not answer the driver, for he did not hear him. "I'll be demented," he said in a whisper to himself, "if I don't stop thinkin' about it!" He began to run towards his home. His cap fell off as he ran, but he did not stop to pick it up, nor did he slacken his pace when he heard people calling to him that his cap had dropped. The rain soaked his hair, and a cold shiver ran through his body as he passed the corner of a street where the wind came curling up from the Lough. "I'll be gettin' my death an' my da's a bad man an' my Aunt Esther's! . . . Jase but it's cold! . . . Where's the house? . . ." He stopped irresolutely, and looked vaguely about him. The waterworks were on one side of the road, and he knew that his lodgings were in a street near at hand. "Where's the Limestone Road?" he said aloud, and a lad, who was passing, stopped

and pointed to it. "There, it's over there," he said, and went on.

Over there! . . . "What ails me?" he said, shaking himself. "Not knowin' that yet! Where's my cap?"

He put his hand to his head and felt the wetness of his hair. "I had a cap," he murmured, "when I come out of the train!"

He began to search the pavement about him, and presently a number of people collected about him. "What are you lookin' for?" they said, and he replied, "I've lost my cap!" It was a funny thing, he added, that he should lose his cap. "You would think I would feel it fallin' off my head," he said. "Is it not anywhere about? It's a grey cap with a big peak! . . ."

"Is it a duncher?" demanded a message boy.

"Aye, that's what you call it—a duncher, wee lad! Did you see it?"

The boy shook his head. "No," he answered, "I was only askin' what sort of a cap it was. It's not about here anyway!"

"You should go on home," a woman said to him, "an' not be standin' there gettin' wet through. Sure, what's an ould cap to your death of cold. Go on home, son!"

He looked at her resentfully. How could she suggest to him that he should go home? Did she not hear him say that he had lost his cap—a grey cap with a big peak. The wee lad said it was a duncher. . . . Mebbe she had good call to be suggesting the like of that to him. Mebbe she knew who had his cap. . . . Could anyone tell him where the Limestone Road was. It used to

be up the Antrim Road. It was called the Limestone Road because . . . What the hell did they mean by hiding his cap on him! Could they not go and get caps of their own? It was a grey cap, he told them. Did they never see a grey cap before? What were they all standin' there gapin' at? Had they no work to do? Go on home to hell er that, the whole of you. . . .

He remembered the phrases he had heard in his mind when he was in the train and on the tramcar, but now the only phrase that came to him was this: An' your Aunt Esther's a bad woman! *Her!*...

He looked round and saw a policeman approaching. "Here's a peeler," he said, and resolved to tell him of the loss of his cap. "It was a grey one," he said, as he recited the story of his loss to the constable, "an' it had a big peak—the kind you call a duncher. There was a wee lad here . . . a woman . . . I live in lodgin's! . . ."

The policeman caught him in his arms as he fell. "Does any of yous know him?" he said to the crowd, as he carried him towards a shop. The crowd did not answer, and he did not repeat his question. "Ah, poor sowl!" exclaimed the woman who had advised Jamesey to go home, and then she hurried on her business. A little crowd collected about the door of the shop into which the policeman had carried Jamesey. "It's a fit," said a boy to a man who asked what was the trouble. . . . A doctor came hurrying from his surgery, and when he had examined Jamesey, he turned to the policeman and said, "Do you know where he lives?"

The policeman nodded his head. He had searched Jamesey's pocket, and found a letter, addressed to him at the house of Mrs. Luke in a street off the Limestone Road.

" Well, get him to his home as quick as you like," said the doctor. " He ought to be in his bed, this lad ! "

They fetched a cab and took him to his home.

CHAPTER XVII

ESTHER had written to Mrs. Martin asking her to meet her at the railway station on the day after Jamesey went up to Belfast. They were to travel together to the city in search of a suitable shop for Esther. But Mrs. Martin could not keep the appointment, for she had hurried to Belfast on receipt of the telegram from Mrs. Luke informing her of Jamesey's illness. She had not time to write to Esther, and so she bid Aggie to meet her on the following morning and tell her that the journey must be postponed for a while. It happened that when the time came for Aggie to go to the station, there were several customers from the big houses in the shop, and she could not leave it; so she called to her father and told him of the matter, and asked him to go to the station in her place. He hesitated for a few moments, and then he did as she desired of him.

Esther was standing in the hall of the station with her back towards him, when he entered it, and she did not see him until he came up to her. She started when he touched her shoulder, and a fear came into her mind. Had Martha turned against her at the last moment? Why had James come in her place? Had he induced

Martha to quarrel with her, and had he come to taunt her in public ? . . .

" Martha's away up to Belfast," he said, speaking in the manner of one who delivers a message in which he takes no interest to one who is a stranger. " Jamesey's sick, an' she went up to look after him last night.

" Jamesey's sick ! " she exclaimed anxiously.

" Aye," he replied. " Martha left word last night with Aggie to come an' tell you, but the shop's full an' she couldn't come, so she sent me ! "

" What's the matter with him ? " she demanded.

" I don't rightly know. He took sick in the street, an' had to be carried home. He's been a bit queer this last few days ! "

Jamesey was ill. She felt as if her head would burst with the agony of knowing that. When she had turned suddenly and seen James standing by her side, she had felt nervous and self-conscious. She had wondered what she should say to him, and how she should say it ; and when she had spoken, she had done so in a constrained voice, in the toneless accents of a woman who speaks commonplaces to a man who has been her lover, but is her lover no more. It had been difficult for her to forget that she had lain in his arms and remember only that he was one of a crowd of drifting strangers to whom she might say a casual word of greeting or whom she might pass by in silence. It had seemed to her, for an instant, to be terribly absurd that he and she should nod their heads and say, " That's a gran' day ! " or " It's soft weather we're havin' ! " when they had lived so intimately together. It was as if the

sea, fresh from beating the rocks in unrelenting fury, should sidle up to them and speak some worn phrase.

But now her constraint had vanished from her tongue, and she was no longer self-conscious and nervous. James ceased to be the ghost of her lover, and became merely a messenger of bad news, a passer-by suddenly entrusted with an errand in which she was concerned.

"Where is he?" she exclaimed, catching hold of his arm so tightly that she nipped the flesh.

"Leave go my arm!" he cried, snatching it from her grasp.

"Where is he?" she repeated.

"Where's who?"

"Jamesey! You know rightly who I mean!.."

"Didn't I tell you he's in Belfast! . . . An' what's it got to do with you where he is?"

She felt her anger rising in her, but she held it back, and when she spoke her voice was very calm. "I don't want to argue with you, James!" she began.

"It wouldn't be no use if you did," he interrupted.

She felt contempt for him. He was answering her in the way an ill-bred brat in the streets shouts names at you.

"Is he at his lodgin's?" she said quietly.

"I didn't ask . . . an' if I did know, I wouldn't tell you. I don't want you interferin' with my family no more, Esther Mahaffy. You've interfered with it enough in the past!"

"I know that, James!"

"Well, if you know it, there's no need to tell

you about it. I come with the message to oblige Aggie, an' not to oblige you. You could 'a' stood here til your feet was sore without me botherin' my head about you. I come to save Aggie trouble. I dare say Martha'll meet you another time, only don't forget it'll not be by my will she'll meet you ! "

She could have laughed aloud when she heard him say that. In other times it would have been natural for him to say, " I've told Martha she's not to go with you ! " and Martha would have done what he desired her to do ; but now. . . . That marked the change in him as much as anything did. He was a nerveless man.

" She'll not go with my will," he repeated, " an' if you have any decency left in you. . . ."

She could not feel angry with him. It would be ridiculous to feel angry with this poor-plucked man.

". . . you'll not force your company on any of us after the day," he concluded.

" I'm not forcing my company on anyone," she said.

" Aye, you are. What do you want with Jamesey, eh ? I wonder at you, after the past, runnin' after the lad the way you do. Are you not ashamed of yourself, comin' in to a man's house, an' mindin' him of things that's over an' done with ? "

She had no reply to make to this outburst of reproach, and so she turned away and walked towards the train which had drawn up in the station, He stood still for a while and gazed after her, and then he followed her.

"I tell you I don't want you talkin' to my childer," he said to her. "Do you hear me speakin', woman!"

"I hear you right enough," she replied.

"Well, be heedin' me then!"

He waited for her to answer, but she did not do so, and he turned to leave her. He walked down the platform towards the street-door and then he turned to look back at her. She was climbing into a carriage. He stopped, and then as if he realized that she was going up to Belfast to see Jamesey, he hurried back along the platform until he came to the door of the carriage in which she was sitting.

"You're not goin' up to Belfast, are you?" he said.

"I am," she replied. "You'll not tell me where Jamesey is, an' I'm goin' up to find out!"

He got into the carriage beside her. "It's no good you goin' anear him," he said, as he did so, "an' I tell you I don't want you to interfere atween him an' me! . . ."

"You said that before, James," she interrupted, "but I'm not heedin' anything you say now!"

"You'll have to heed me. What would Jamesey say, do you think, if he knew about you an' me, eh?"

He leered at her as if he were suggesting that he would betray her if she did not desist from forcing herself on his son. She looked round at him, and watched the expression on his face for a few seconds before she replied.

"He knows already," she said quietly.

The leer went off his face, and in its place came a

look of fear and horror. "He knows already! . . ." he gasped.

She nodded her head. "I told him when he came out to Millisle a day or two ago," she said.

He gaped at her incredulously. He could not believe that she had told her secret to Jamesey. When he had leered at her as if he would make her believe that she must do as he commanded her on pain of having her story told to Jamesey, he had had no intention of making any revelation. He did not care whether Jamesey knew or not, but he was afraid of Aggie learning the truth.

"You're lettin' on," he said.

"It 'ud be a quare thing to let on about," she answered.

"You mean you told him?"

She nodded her head.

"Holy God!" he exclaimed.

The ticket collector came to examine the tickets, and James descended from the carriage. The collector closed the door, and when he had gone, James leant over the window and looked at Esther with an expression of dreadful misery in his eyes.

"What did you do it for?" he said.

"I had to tell him," she answered. "Things were put in his mind by Mr. Haveron and his Uncle Henry! . . ."

"Hell to them!"

"An' I couldn't keep it back from him. I had to tell him."

"Och, what's the good of talkin' that way. You didn't need to tell him. . . ."

"Aye, I did need to tell him. . . . I'm not goin' to talk to you about it so you needn't be

waitin' no longer. You can go back to your Aggie!" There was a strain of bitterness in her voice when she said the last sentence.

He did not move away even when the guard blew his whistle.

"Will he tell Aggie, do you think?" he said.

"I don't know, an' I don't care!" she replied wearily.

"You don't care! My God, Esther, I'll make you care if he tells her!"

The guard blew his whistle again, and the train began to move out of the station. James walked by the side of the carriage in which Esther sat as long as he could keep pace with the train, but he did not speak to her. He glared at her with eyes full of hate, and then when he could no longer keep up with her carriage, he shook his fist at her and damned her loudly. She paid no heed to his looks and curses, but sat in a corner, looking out of the further window. She must be near to Jamesey. She must find him and take care of him, and win him from his sickness to love of her again. He might be at his lodgings, but if he were in a hospital, the woman who kept the lodgings could tell her where he was. There were two hospitals in Belfast of which she knew, the Royal Hospital and the Mater Infirmorum, so her search would not be a difficult one. If only Martha had sent for her last night. . . . As the train ran along the track, under the road to Millisle along which she had walked that morning after the day on which James returned to Ballyreagh, she stood up in the carriage and leant against the window. There on one side was the sea moving

very gently on to the rocks, and here on this side were fields of flax and corn and grazing-lands. She saw the tall tower of the Moat, high on its hill, and her mind filled with memories of the events in her life with which it was associated. . . . She moved forward so that she could lean out of the window and look back at the little town in which she had lived since she was born . . . and as she did so, she realized that she was bidding it farewell. She would never return to Ballyreagh, nor would she ever again see the things there that had moulded her life. The Cathers would wonder. . . . She was taking her dusty and bitter memories with her, but she had some pleasure in remembering that she was leaving their cradle behind her.

The train gathered speed, and very soon Ballyreagh was hidden from her, but still she stood at the window gazing back towards the place where her home had been. She felt the train curving, and when she glanced across the fields, she saw Helen's Tower on a height and fell to wondering about Helen. . . . She remembered how Martha and she, when Jamesey and Aggie were little, had made an excursion to the Tower one day, and Jamesey had begged to be told the story of Helen's Tower. . . . She did not cry, for the wells of her eyes were empty. She had been down to the bottom of the valley of humiliation and unsatisfied desires, and had shed all her tears in going down ; and now she was marching out of the valley, not, indeed, with a smiling face and a light heart, but with her head held high and her eyes clear. If Jamesey would take her love again, she would be happy once

more ; for now her life would not have any illusions in it. She would not be sitting up in her room in the long afternoons, looking over the sea and wondering where James was, living or dead, nor would she keep a chamber of her heart locked for him. She would give all her love to Jamesey, she would make him the day-star of her dreams. . . . She did not resume her seat until the train ran into Newtownards station, and then she sat down and closed her eyes in peace, and did not open them again until she was in Belfast.

She went to Mrs. Luke's house, and when she knocked at the door it was opened by Martha. Mrs. Martin did not appear to be surprised at seeing her standing there on the doorstep.

" I thought you might come," she said, as she led her into the house. " I knew you'd be upset when you heard about Jamesey bein' sick, but I wish you hadn't come all the same ! "

" Is he bad, Martha ? "

" No, not very bad. He's light-headed a bit ! "

" Did he ask for me, Martha ? "

" No, Esther, he didn't ! "

Esther turned away and waited for her sister to speak again, but Martha did not speak. She went towards the door of the room in which they were sitting. " I'm goin' upstairs to him now," she said. " I'll not tell him you're here, not yet a wee while. It 'ud mebbe upset him ! . . ."

" Ah, sure ! . . ."

" I'll break it to him by degrees, Esther ! " She came back into the room and stood beside her sister. " I suppose you told him everything ? " she said.

Esther nodded her head.

"Poor wee lad," Martha exclaimed, "it must have upset him terrible!"

Esther put her hand on her sister's arm and pressed it as if she were appealing to her. "What'll I do, Martha?" she said. "If I lose him, I'll have nothin' in the world!"

"I don't know, Esther. We'll have to wait a while til things is quieter. Don't be sittin' here an' broodin' now. You'd better go on home again. . ."

"I'll never go back there again, Martha," Esther said, interrupting. "I can't bear to live there with everything tellin' me about the times that's gone. I said to myself in the train as I was comin' here, I'd never put my foot in the place another time as long as I live, an' I won't, Martha, so don't ask me!"

She told her sister of her encounter with James.

"He was ragin' when he heard that Jamesey knew about him an' me!"

"Was he, Esther?"

"Aye. He's afeard of his life of Aggie gettin' to know!"

"He's quarely taken up with her. . . I wonder if Mrs. Luke can take you in, Esther?"

"You'll let me stay with you while he's sick, won't you, Martha? I couldn't bear not to be near him an' him not well."

"Aye, you can stay here if there's room for you."

They consulted Mrs. Luke and found that it was possible for Esther to remain in the house, and so it was arranged that she should do so.

"An' now you can just go out an' look about you, Esther," said Mrs. Martin when the arrange-

ments were complete. "It's no good you sittin' here broodin' over everything. Go on out an' take a walk to yourself, an' mebbe you'll see a shop'll suit you. That'll give you plenty to occupy your mind. You can be findin' a place for Jamesey to live in when he's better—an' while you're out, I'll tell him you're here."

Esther did not want to go out. If Martha only knew how anxious she was about Jamesey, she would not have the heart to ask her to quit out of the house until she had seen him. . . .

"Esther, dear, I know rightly," Mrs. Martin said, "but you'd do better to go and do as I tell you. I'll have him prepared for you by the time you get back. What you told him hurt him fearful, an' a young lad takes a while to get over the like of that, an' him not well. I'll talk til him quietly, an' tell him the way of things, an' mebbe he'll be more amenable by the evenin'! . . ."

"Does he not want to see me, then?"

"Now, don't be talkin', dear, but go on out as I tell you, an' it'll mebbe be all right in a wee while. He's like yourself, he's not wantin' to go back to Ballyreagh, an' mebbe if you were to come back an' tell him of a shop you've got he'd be willin' to live with you in it when he's better?"

"Mebbe you're right, Martha!"

"I am, Esther!" Mrs. Martin replied. "You'll have a bite to ate now—Mrs. Luke'll get it for you—an' then you'll go out a while!"

She left her sister in the kitchen with Mrs. Luke, and went upstairs to her son's bedroom, and later on she heard the street door close softly and she knew that Esther had gone out to explore the city.

CHAPTER XVIII

ESTHER went out of the house when she had finished her meal, and sauntered down the Limestone Road towards the tramway station. A fine air blew down the road from the Cave Hill, and she drew in deep breaths of it as she strolled along. Her spirits rose as her lungs expanded, and the heavy dolour which had lain upon her in the morning rolled off her. She climbed on to a tramcar, without looking at the indicator to see the name of its destination, and let herself be carried towards the town. There was a bright look of hard cheeriness about Belfast. She saw that the houses were ugly and badly contrived, even when they were occupied by men of means, and she felt some of the monotony of the dreary streets through which the car carried her; but if the streets were ugly and the houses mean in appearance, they were without pretence, and those who lived in them, though they had no feeling for fine things, were alert and keen and full of movement. The liveliness of the people returning to their shops and offices and warerooms from their mid-day meal, infected her; and in a little while she was planning her life in the city, with Jamesey as her son; for now she looked upon him as if he were her child.

She would build a big business, more prosperous than that which Martha had created, and she would make a will in Jamesey's favour. She would leave all her money to him, and then he would be very well-off. He would have to be rich before anyone in Belfast would think highly of him. Some one said to her once, that if Jesus Christ Himself were to live in Belfast, and were not the managing director of a linen-mill or some equally rich man, He would not gain any Belfast man's respect. "They would make Ould Nick himself Lord Mayor if he had a lot of money, an' was a Prodesan'!" She had laughed at Johnnie-look-up-at-the-moon when he said that, but she knew it was true, and she fully approved of the spirit behind that truth. She would try to put Jamesey in the way of getting rich. She would work hard in her shop, and scrape every penny together that she could, and she would try and get a nice girl with money for Jamesey to marry. . . . Mebbe, if the shop were successful, she could open another one, and then Jamesey could give up his work at "the Island" if he liked and take charge of it. "Who knows," she murmured to herself, "we might have six shops one place and another!"

Jamesey and his wife would have a son and a daughter, and they would spend a great deal of money on educating them. The boy would be sent to Campbell College and then to the Queen's University, and the girl would go to Mrs. Byers' school. . . . She knew a minister who got his education at Campbell College, and he was the only man of notable education she had ever known . . .

so Jamesey should send his son to Campbell College, too, or if that was not the best school in Belfast, they would send the child to whatever school was best . . . and perhaps he would become a minister, and be thought a great deal of, and the daughter would learn to play the piano and talk in the way the English talk . . . " not broad like me an' Martha ! " . . . and then she would marry a high-up man that would mebbe be on the Corporation, " an' who knows but she might be the Lady Mayoress one day ! "

It would be a fine consolation to her for all she had endured if she could bring prosperity to Jamesey, and place him in the way of becoming an eminent citizen. Dear knows what he might become, for he had the head for getting on ! Half the people in Belfast had begun far lower down then Jamesey. Look at that man that kept the druggist's shop, an' was made Lord Mayor an' let call himself " Sir " like any quality-man, and look at the man that kept the wee sweetie shop, an' his ma sold dulce and green apples an' made sticky lumps an' yellow man with her own hands—an' there he was now with three shops, an' him a Justice of the Peace, sending fellows to jail for a month and more, an' as likely as not he would be Lord Mayor one day, an' have his picture hung up in the Town Hall ! Some Lord Mayors had their statue put up to them ! . . . An' if the like of them could do the like of that, why couldn't Jamesey do it, too ! He had been well-reared, which was more than some of the men that had got on were, for plenty of them had no more manners than an ould dish-clout ! . . .

She descended from the tramcar at Castle Junction. The dinner-time was not yet over, and there was a confusion of men and women in the streets: ladies shopping, young clerks and wareroom girls flirting, and newsboys running here and there with *Telegraphs* and *Echoes*. She wondered why they called out "Telly-ger-ah!" for Telegraph . . . and then passed along Donegall Place, where the rich shops are, and spent a while in gazing into windows at furs and dresses and shoes and linen goods. She paused for a lengthy time at the door of a photographer's studio, looking at the portraits of fashionable women and celebrated men . . . and wondered why it was that she had never had fine clothes to wear. She, too, had been lovely . . . no one could deny that, although they might say that she no longer had a beautiful appearance . . . but she had never had a rich dress in which to array her beauty. "Some of them women isn't nice-lookin' at all," she said to herself, as she looked at the portrait of a scraggy marchioness, "an' the clothes don't look near as nice on them as they would 'a' looked on me. Aggie would set them off quaren well! . . ."

She turned away from the case of photographs and walked up the Place towards the City Hall. She had never been inside it, and she decided to enter the building and look about her, but before she crossed the street she saw a tramcar coming towards her, bearing "Albert Bridge Road" on its indicator, and suddenly she remembered that the girl at the Cathers' had told her of a man who kept a hardware shop on that road, and was eager to sell it. She called to the driver of the

car to stop, and mounted it and was carried over the bridges, across the Lagan to the Albert Bridge Road. She sat on top of the car, and saw the hills that make a lovely belt about the city. A light roll of mist lay on the side of them, but it did not blur the outline of Napoleon's Head, rising above the Lough. She got down from the tramcar, and stood for a while leaning against the parapet of the Albert Bridge, thinking to herself how lovely was the world. The Lagan was in full tide, and so the filthy mud that the manufacturers have poured into was mercifully hidden from her eyes: she only saw the beautiful winding movement of the river as it came by Ormeau Park and ran under the bridge towards the quays and then to the sea. A little group of boys, stripped to the pelt, bathed off the logs that a timber merchant kept floating on the south side of the river, and Esther watched the sunlight glistening on their shining wet skins. They would stand erect on a log, hands stretched upwards, and then bend swiftly forwards and cut the water with their hands and head. Up they would come, puffing and blowing and shaking the water from their eyes and hair, and make long, easy strokes as they swam and dived and floated. Such shouts they gave, and jolly noises, and when they had climbed out of the river on to the logs again, how daringly they ran along the moving piles to dry their skins in the wind! There was a dog that ran up and down the logs, barking at the bathers, and nosing the water as if he wondered whether he too should dive in . . . and then a lump of a lad gave it a shove, and in it went! . . . Esther laughed aloud

when she saw the dog scramble indignantly back on to the logs, and shake itself petulantly. . . .

She began to feel kinship with the inhabitants of this city. She felt that she could easily love it for its briskness and its keen air and its lovely hills and beautiful, winding river, and its cheery crowd of men and women and boys and girls who go blithely to their work. Everything about the city pleased her, even its mean and ugly things. The miserable Albert Memorial seemed to her to be a splendid tower. . . . "You can see the time from here!" she said to herself as she looked at it . . . and the drab, displeasing building which the drab, displeasing Presbyterians have built for themselves . . . she could see the roof of it . . . even these pleased her as greatly as the hills and the sea and the running river and the fine air of the morning. She resolved that she would live near this bridge if it were possible for her to do so, because here she could see so much of the city spread out before her.

She had lived a quiet, effortless life in Ballyreagh, broken by her adventure with James. One did not derive a sense of exultation from one's work there: it was dull labour, dully done. But here, in Belfast, men took pride in work. The hearty ring of great labour could be heard everywhere in the city. Horns hooted all round her, calling women to the mill and men to the foundry. She remembered that when she came out of the terminus of the County Down Railway that morning she had heard the regular clanging of hammers on steel as the men in the shipyards beat the sides of ships together, and made them fit

for the big adventures of the sea. How could she fail to live happily in this city where there was making and remaking of things that penetrated the seven seas and were known in lonely remote places because they were excellent and good. Here were engines and ships and fine linens and great ropes; tall, towering vessels that moved from continent to continent and carried a thousand souls as easily as a rowing-boat carries one man; great boilers and shining engines and little twisting wheels that made gigantic energies; and delicately broidered fabrics to fold about a woman's slender limbs . . . all these were made in this city, and were known all over the world. Her heart stirred proudly when she recollected that Jamesey had his place in that shipyard where the mightiest boats in the world are made. He had helped to lay the lines of one great vessel and another, and had felt joy surge in him when he saw a ship leave the slips when a little cord was slit, and move slowly into the river with the grace of a royal swan. She, too, would feel that pride. She would have no more sorrows in her heart. She would take her place in this city of hammering men, whose deeds of making and shaping and forming and fashioning are a marvel of the marvels of men. . . . .

She turned away from the bridge and went across the road to the public-house at the corner of Short Strand, where a policeman was standing, and asked him if he could tell her where Ferguson's hardware shop was. It was near at hand. If she would walk down the road past the Woodstock Road, and keep on until she came to the shop

with the big brush over the door, she would see it plain enough. She thanked him, and followed in the direction he had given her; and in a short while came to the shop. She stood for some moments gazing in at the window, and was pleased to see that it was well-stocked with goods. The shop seemed bigger than she wanted, but perhaps, she told herself, that did not matter. She went into it and spoke to the proprietor, a Scotsman, who desired to quit the city and return to his home on the eastern side of Scotland. She discussed the situation of the shop with him, and the amount of the turnover, and the price he required for the goodwill, and then he conducted her over the house. The whole of the ground floor was occupied by shopspace: the return-room had been altered to a kitchen and there were a bedroom and a drawing-room on the first floor, and two attics above them.

"It's a big house," she said, standing in the centre of the large drawing-room and looking about her; "there'll only be me an' my nephew to live in it. . . ." Her vision of Jamesey's future came into her mind again, and she said to herself that when he married, he and his wife could live with her. "I'd be quaren lonely if he was to marry an' set up for himself somewhere else," she thought.

She talked for some time with the owner of the shop, and then she went away. "I'll let you know my decision in a wee while," she said, "I'll have to be talk it over with my sister. Mebbe her an' me'll come in to see you the morrow or the next day!"

She walked home, not feeling fatigue until she had reached the Limestone Road again, and as she walked she tried to reckon what sum she might leave to Jamesey when she died. The money her father had left her had grown slowly into a comfortable sum, and the purchase price of the goodwill of the Albert Bridge Road shop would affect her fortune inappreciably ; but she wanted to leave a very big amount of money to Jamesey ; and so she plotted and contrived in her mind how she should make it, and so absorbed was she in her plans that she did not notice the length of the road she had to go, nor did she notice how tired she was until her feet began to drag. "I'll be glad to get in," she said to herself. "I wonder has Martha told Jamesey yet I'm here ! "

She knocked at the door and was admitted to the house by Mrs. Luke.

"Och, is that you ? " Mrs. Luke exclaimed. "I was wonderin' would you come home to your tay. Come on in an' I'll have it ready for you in a wee minute ! "

"Is my sister downstairs ? " Esther asked as she took off her hat and jacket.

"No, she is not, but I daresay she'll be down in a wee while ! "

She went upstairs to the room which had been allotted to her, and left her hat and jacket there, and washed her hands and face. When she came out of the room she met Martha on the stairs. She was about to speak to her, when Martha held her fingers to her lips.

"Don't say a word," she said, taking hold of her arm and leading her downstairs.

"Is he worse, Martha?" Esther asked anxiously.

"No, he's all right. He's a good deal better nor he was. I think he'll mebbe be able to get up a wee while the morrow. . . . It's not that, Esther!"

Mrs. Luke came to the door of the kitchen and called to Esther.

"I have your tay ready," she said.

Martha answered her. "All right, Mrs. Luke," she replied. "We'll be in in a wee minute. I just want to say somethin' to my sister!"

She led Esther into the parlour and shut the door behind her.

"I've told him you're here, Esther. . . ."

"Yes, Martha?"

Mrs. Martin did not reply immediately. She took hold of Esther's hand and pressed it.

"What is it, Martha?"

"You'll not be vexed, Esther, dear . . . he's not near himself at all . . . he's sick, you understand! . . "

"Oh, what is it?"

"I told him you were here, an' he said he didn't want you to stop. . . ."

Esther withdrew her hand from her sister's grasp, and stood with her back to her. She did not speak. She stood quite still with her fingers clutching the rim of the round mahogany table. The table had a beaded edge, and she let her fingers run backwards and forwards along it—one, two, three . . . and then it was nine; one, two, three . . . and then it was nine again. . . .

"I'm quaren sorry, Esther," Mrs. Martin said.

One, two, three. . . . She took her fingers off the beading, and turned to her sister. "What'll I do?" she said.

"Do nothin' yet awhile! I tell you, he's not near himself. I told him you'd go away the night! . . ."

"The night!"

"Aye, but sure you needn't do that! I only said it to quiet him. It's no good puttin' him in an agitation, an' him the bad he is. He needn't know you're here, an' mebbe when he's stronger, an' I have a talk with him again he'll change his mind!"

Esther did not reply at once. She went to the window and sat down on a chair there with her face averted from Martha. The dream she had made as she rode on the tramcar had dissolved, and now she was left with nothing. Jamesey did not want her to stay in the same house with him. He could not bear to have her near him. . . . She got up and went to Martha's side. Her demeanour was calm, and her voice was firm. There were no tears in her eyes, and no remonstrance in what she said.

"I'd better do what he wants," she said.

"No, Esther, you'll not go yet awhile. He'll never know you're here! . . ."

"I would know, Martha, wouldn't I?"

Martha looked at her closely. This was a new Esther that stood before her, a woman she had never seen before.

"Aye, that's true, Esther," she said. "That's true enough!"

Esther went to the door of the room and opened

it. "I'll have my tay," she said, "an' then I'll get my things an' go. Mebbe, Mrs. Luke'll tell me where I can get lodgin's!"

"I daresay she can!" replied Mrs. Martin.

"It's a good job I haven't writ to the Cathers yet," Esther said, standing with her hand on the edge of the door. She smiled as she spoke, a dry, uncheerful smile. "They'd 'a' been sendin' my things til the wrong address!"

They went into the kitchen where the tea was laid, and Mrs. Martin told Mrs. Luke that Esther found it necessary to seek other lodgings. "It's over the head of some bother," she said in explanation, and Mrs. Luke nodded her head as if she understood. While Esther had her tea, eating very little, Mrs. Martin inquired about fresh rooms for her. "It'll need to be a place near here," she said, "where her an' me can be together when we want to!"

Mrs. Luke knew of suitable apartments and at Mrs. Martin's request she went off to inquire about them. When she had gone, the two sisters sat in silence while Esther finished her meal.

"You're not eatin' nothin', Esther," Mrs. Martin said.

"I don't want much, Martha. I've had enough!"

Mrs. Martin cut a piece of soda-bread and buttered it.

"Here," she said, "eat that. You've tasted nothin' at all, an' you must be starvin'!"

"I couldn't touch it, Martha! . . ."

Mrs. Martin put the bread down on a plate and went to Esther, and put her arms round her and

dragged her up from her seat so that her head rested on her shoulder.

"I'd give the world for this not to have happened, Esther," she said.

"I know you would, Martha!"

"I can't bear to see you bein' hurt the way you are, with everything turnin' against you . . . but I'm not against you, Esther, no matter for no one, an' you'll come to me whenever you need me, so you will, whatever anybody says, won't you?"

Esther could not speak—she knew that she should cry if she spoke—so she just nodded her head.

"Don't be upsettin' yourself, Esther, dear, over the head of this. It'll mebbe come all right in a wee while. Jamesey's not well, poor son, or he would never have said it . . . an' you have to humour them when they're sick, so you have, an' it's no good grumblin'. Him an' me'll have a wee crack thegether when he's better, an' mebbe he'll understan' better when he's listened to an ould woman. Young lads is quaren set on themselves, Esther, an' they don't know the half they think they know, but there's nothin' bad in them, an' when you tell them things quiet and nice they're quaren understandin'. They're not like ould men that have no wits at all, but goes on sayin' things over an' over, an' them not a hap'orth the wiser for it, nor you neither!"

Mrs. Luke came back as she said this, and so she let Esther go. It was all right, Mrs. Luke said, her friend could take Esther in, and would be very glad to do so.

"Will you get ready now, Esther," Mrs. Martin

said. "I'll come the length of the house with you, an' see you safely settled!"

"Do you think you ought to leave him, Martha?' she replied.

"He's asleep, daughter dear, an' he'll not harm if he's left a wee while. Get your hat an' jacket on now, an' we'll go up thegether."

They got ready to go out, and Mrs. Luke directed them to the house.

"Good-night, Mrs. Luke," said Esther.

"Good-night to you!" Mrs. Luke replied.

Then Martha took hold of Esther's arm and held it very tightly, and they walked up the road in the dusk together to the house where Esther was to stay.

"I'll not come in," she said, as they stood at the door.

"All right, Martha. Good-night to you!"

Mrs. Martin drew her to her and kissed her. "Good-night, Esther," she said, "an' God love you!"

CHAPTER XIX

Mrs. Martin had written to Aggie before she spoke to Jamesey of Esther, and had told her that her aunt was staying with her.

"Jamesey's gettin' on nicely, da!" Aggie said to her father. "My Aunt Esther's stoppin' in the same lodgin's with him an' my ma!"

"Who is?" he said, looking across the shop at her as if he were not quite certain that he had heard aright.

"My Aunt Esther, da. So she went up to Belfast after all?"

"I saw her goin' in the train," he replied. He tied some hearth-brushes together and suspended them from a nail in the ceiling. "Is she stoppin' long with them?" he said, when he had done this.

"My ma says she's stoppin' with Jamesey althegether, an' she's not comin' back til Ballyreagh no more. It's quare her goin' on like that just when you come home, da!"

"Is it, daughter?"

"Aye, you would near think you an' her wasn't speakin', the way she's conductin' herself. I don't think it was at all like the thing her goin' off to the Cathers at Millisle the way she done, an' you hardly got your head inside the door. Things like that makes people talk!"

There was a look of alarm in his eyes as he went over to the counter, and leaned across it.

"Did you hear any talk about it?" he said.

"No," she replied, "I did not. Forby, I wouldn't listen to it if I did!"

He smiled at her and patted her hand. "Ah, you're the right wee girl," he said.

Aggie went to the oil-barrel and measured out a gallon of oil. "Will you take this lamp-oil up to Mrs. Orr's now, da?" she said.

"I will if you want me to!" He took the oil-can from her and got ready to go out.

"My ma says my Aunt Esther's goin' to start a shop the same as this in Belfast, an' have Jamesey to lodge with her! . . ."

He put the oil-can down and gazed about him stupidly.

"Is anything ailin' you, da?" Aggie asked anxiously.

He pulled himself together and took the oil-can up again. "No," he said. "Ah, no! Nothin' ails me. I'm away now to Mrs. Orr's with the oil. I'll be back in a wee while!"

He left the shop and proceeded along the road to Mrs. Orr's house. So she had taken no notice of what he had said to her. He had told her she was not to interfere with his family in future, but instead of going away and hiding herself from them, she had boldly gone to his wife and son and announced that she intended to offer a home to the lad. . . . And Jamesey knew all that there had been between them, too, and his mind was turned against his father already! . . . Damn her! . . . Of course, if Esther was to stay in

Belfast for the rest of her life . . . but Jamesey would come down to Ballyreagh sometimes . . . and Aggie would go up to Belfast now and then . . . the girl would wonder why her aunt never came near them, and mebbe she would ask questions, and Esther would give answers to them. It would be like Esther to do that. She would take a delight in turning Aggie against him, just to spite him for the way he had treated her. . . .

He left the oil at Mrs. Orr's house and then walked slowly to the shop. Perhaps, he thought to himself, he would have done better to tell Aggie the truth himself. Martha had made a suggestion of that sort to him when he first returned. Mebbe, if he were to tell her some of the truth, not all of it, just the bit about Esther, and were to put it as well as he could. . . . He remembered that he had heard Aggie speak bitterly one day of a man who had treated his wife badly. "I wouldn't own him if I was her!" she had said emphatically. The man had not done anything like the things that he had done, and if Aggie were so fierce in her anger against him, would she not be fiercer still against her father when she learned the truth about him? He had managed to divert her mind from inquiring about his life since he had left home by talking vaguely about troubles and dissensions, but if she should hear a particle of the facts, if suspicion should grow up in her mind, he might have difficulty in keeping her affection. . . he might lose it altogether. Jamesey might tell on him, but so far he had not said anything, and perhaps he would keep the news to himself. If only Esther were away somewhere! . . . Well, it

was no good wishing. She was in Belfast, living in the same house with Jamesey and Martha, and proposing to find a home where Jamesey could always live with her—a constant menace to his peace of mind unless he could persuade Aggie to listen to his story without turning from him with loathing.

He entered the shop and found Aggie putting on her hat. "I saw you comin', " she said, "so I started to get ready. Will you just stop here a wee while til I go home an' make the dinner, an' then I'll bring yours down to you ! "

He nodded his head, and then went and sat down at the back of the shop. "You'll not be long, will you ? " he asked as she went towards the door.

"No," she replied, "I will not ! ' She stood for a few moments on the step gazing up and down the road. "It's a quare nice day, the day ! " she said.

"Aye ! "

"If it keeps up like this, I declare I'll go up to Belfast on Sunday an' see how is Jamesey ! . . ."

He started from his seat. "What do you say ? " he exclaimed.

She did not observe that he was agitated.

"I think I'll go up to Belfast on Sunday," she replied, "if it's fine, an' see Jamesey an' my ma an' my Aunt Esther ! . . ."

"Your Aunt Esther ? "

"Aye, I haven't seen her this good while. It'll be a change for me. Mebbe, you'd like to come yourself, da ? "

He went back to his seat. "Ah, what do you

want to go up there for?" he said. "Sure, Jamesey's all right. Your ma said he was gettin' better, didn't she?"

"Och, aye, but I would like to go up just for the sake of the thing!"

"It's not much of a place to be goin' to, Belfast!" he said.

She came back into the shop, laughing at him as she did so. "Sure, I'm not goin' to see the place," she said. "I'm goin' to see Jamesey an' my ma an' my Aunt Esther. No one but a man was born blind would go to Belfast on a Sunday!"

"They'll not be wantin' you there! . . ."

"You would think, the way you're talkin', you didn't want me to go!" she said acidly.

"Och, now, Aggie," he exclaimed quickly, "what put that notion in your head? What would I not want you to go for? You can go if you like! You can, of course! I was only thinkin' that your ma'll be all throughother with Jamesey sick! . . ."

"My ma's never throughother, an' Jamesey's gettin' better, so that's settled. If you don't like to come with me, sure you can stop at home!"

There was temper in her voice, and he felt that he must conciliate her somehow. "I wasn't meanin' nothin'," he said plaintively, "only as I was comin' along I had an idea of takin' you for a sail in the Bangor boat!"

Her eyes brightened, and the ill-temper went out of her voice. "Were you, da?" she exclaimed in pleasure. "That was quaren thoughtful of you!"

"Aye. There's a bill on the wall about a coast

trip from Belfast. The boat stops at Bangor an' here, an' then it goes til Larne an' back again. I said to myself, it would be right good diversion for Aggie if I was to take her for a trip . . . an', of course, I felt a bit disappointed when I heard you sayin' you were goin' til Belfast. I wasn't meanin' til tell you yet a while. . . . I wanted to give you a wee surprise ! . . ."

She went to him and put her arms round his neck. "Ah, da !" she exclaimed.

"Of course, if you're set on goin' to see your ma an' Jamesey," he said cunningly, for he saw that he had shaken her resolve, "you'll have to go . . . but I'll be quarely disappointed !"

"We'll wait til Sunday," she said. "If it's fine I'll go with you on the trip, an' if it's wet I'll got up to Belfast. I must hurry now an' get the dinner, or if I don't it'll be tay-time before ever I know !"

She kissed him and went quickly out of the shop. He got up and followed her to the door and stood looking after her. At the corner of Hunter's Lane she turned and waved her hand to him and he waved his in response, and then she went out of sight. He had not achieved much after all. Whether she went to Belfast on Sunday or not depended on the chance of what the weather was like. It was fine enough that minute, but in the morning the rain might be coming down in sheets, and on Sunday it might be as stormy a day as ever there was. Even if the weather were fine, and he and Aggie went sailing on the Bangor boat to Larne, he would not be delivered from his fear ; for Aggie would want to go and see Jamesey some

other day. She would be certain to insist upon seeing Esther's new shop. Whatever way he looked at it, his problem seemed insoluble. If Esther were away somewhere, if she were in America . . . but what was the use of wishing? Wishing would not alter facts. Esther was in Belfast and likely to stay there, and Aggie would one day go to see her. . . . Of course, Esther might not tell Aggie of her relations with him. It was true that she had told Jamesey, but suspicion had been put into Jamesey's mind, and he had gone to her . . . and Esther was fonder of Jamesey than she was of Aggie. She might easily feel that she must tell Jamesey, but have no feeling about telling Aggie. If he could get her to promise not to tell the girl! Mebbe if he were to write to Martha and ask her to use her influence with Esther, she would consent never to reveal anything to Aggie. Martha could coax Jamesey, too. . . . It was enough to drive a man distracted mad to sit and wonder what was best to be done. He would write to Martha, that was what he would do, or write to Esther . . . no, he would not write to Esther; he could not beg a favour from her—he would write to Martha and tell her of his fear and beg her for the love of God to make Esther swear never to tell anything of her story to Aggie. . . .

He went behind the counter and searched for the pen and ink, and when he had found them he opened the desk and rummaged among the accounts and papers there in search of writing-paper. He found a few bill-heads, and he began to write to his wife. He wrote, "Dear Martha,"

and then he put the pen and ink back on the desk, and tore the bill-head in pieces and flung it under the counter. He would not write to his wife. He would go to Belfast by the next train, and see Martha and Esther, and talk over the matter with them. That would be the best thing to do. He would make some excuse to Aggie for leaving the shop for the rest of the day. He would pretend he was going over to Newtownards about something or other : he would not tell her he was going to Belfast because if he were to do so, she might wonder at his sudden resolve. He would tell her that after he had had his dinner he was going for a long walk as far, perhaps, as Newtownards, and would not be back until late. He would say he was tired of sitting in the shop all day, and felt a need for a long walk. . . .

He ruminated in this manner until Aggie returned to the shop, carrying his dinner in a basket. He ate the meal in silence, and then when he had finished he got up and stretched himself and said that he felt in great need of exercise. "I haven't had a good walk since I come home," he said, "an' I was rightly used to walkin' in America ! "

"I daresay you were, da. America's a bigger place nor this, an' you'd be more accustomed to big distances there nor here ! "

"You are, indeed," he replied. "It's bad for you not to get your proper exercise if you're used to it. I feel quaren fidgety ! . . ."

"Well, sure, go on out for a walk. It'll do you good."

"Ah, but I wouldn't like to leave you by your

lone. It wouldn't be right to ask you to look after the shop without some one to help you ! . . ."

" Indeed, then, an' I'll be all right," she replied. " I've been left by myself many's the time, an' got on brave an' well. Forby, this isn't a busy day anyway. Go on off with you, now, an' be exercisin' yourself, for sure I've oftentimes been told if a man's not let walk himself tired now an' a while, he'll disturb the house fearful ! " She smiled at him. " If I don't let you go," she continued, " I'll have you smashin' all the delph on me, an' then what'll my ma say ! "

" Ah, go long with you ! " he exclaimed, throwing a piece of paper at her.

She caught the paper and threw it aside. " What did I tell you," she said. " You've started cloddin' things already ! Go on out quick or you'll be kickin' the place to bits ! "

He pretended to be angry with her, and began to kick at the crocks in the corner, and she pretended to be alarmed, and ran and wrestled with him. He struggled with her and she tried to push him out, vowing all the while that she would send for the peelers ; and then he suddenly relaxed his hold on her, and she fell into his arms, and he kissed her and told her she was a wee tory, and that she plagued the life out of her poor old father, but that he would be even with her yet for he would take a long tramp and not be home until after dark ; and then she would think he had run away from her, and was never coming back again. . . .

" Ah, you're an ould blether ! " she exclaimed, pulling his beard.

"Well, I'm goin' now," he said. "I'll not be back for my tay. I'll walk as far as Newtownards! . . ."

"Och, for dear sake," she cried, mocking him. "Sure, you could never walk that length, an ould lad like you!"

"I could walk twice that length," he replied. "I could walk til Belfast an' back as easy as anything! . . ."

"You're quaren good at gabblin'!" she said.

"Will you dare me to walk to Newtownards an' back," he retorted. "Go on! Dare me! I'll bate you sixpence I walk there an' back. . . ."

"Och, I wouldn't like to take your money from you!"

"Well, I'll walk it any way!"

He went out of the shop, and started to go towards the station. She followed him to the door and when she saw the direction in which he was walking, she shouted to him.

"Hi, da!" she called. "That's not the way to Newtownards!"

He waved his hand to her. "Sure, I was only goin' this way to cod you," he replied. "I was lettin' on to go by train!"

She wagged her head at him, and he turned up one of the streets leading to the Newtownards Road, but he did not go far. He came back to the corner of the street, and peered cautiously round it. Aggie was not standing at the shop-door, and so he went on quickly to the station. There was a train standing at the platform when he entered the hall, and he took his ticket and climbed into a smoking-carriage and soon was being carried to the city.

He found the house in which Jamesey lodged after some trouble, for he had lost his familiarity with Belfast.

"Is Mrs. Martin in?" he said to Mrs. Luke who opened the door.

"She is not," Mrs. Luke replied. "She's away out with her sister over the town!"

"Will she be long, do you think?" he asked.

"I couldn't tell you. Are you a friend of hers?"

"Aye," he replied. "I was wantin' to see her partic'lar, an' I have to go back to Ballyreagh the night!"

"Mebbe you'll come in an' rest yourself a wee while. I don't know what time they'll be here, but her son'll be in any minute. He's not been very well! . . ."

"I heard that!"

"An' he just got up the day for the first time since he was took bad. He's away out for a bit of a dandher, but I don't suppose he'll be long before he's back!"

He hesitated, and then he turned away. "Ah, I'll not bother him," he said, "an' him not well. It's his ma I was wantin' to see, not him. I'll call back in a while if you think she'll not be late. . . ."

"She'll be back for her tay any way. Her an' her sister went over to Ballymacarrett to see a shop the sister's thinkin' of takin'!"

He nodded his head and went down the path. "Thank you very much, mem!" he said. "I'll come back in the evenin'!"

"Will I say who called?" Mrs. Luke asked.

"Ah, no, you needn't bother," he replied as he walked off.

He went down the road, and when he came to the Antrim Road he crossed it and walked along one of the streets which run at right angles to it. When he had walked some time, and had crossed York Street, and had penetrated into the little slums that lie on the south of it, he found himself at the harbour. Rain began to fall, and he stood in the porch of a public-house for shelter. The sheds into which the cargo of the cross-Channel steamers was discharged had a dreary, dreepy look, and the carters and stevedores, who had covered their shoulders with sacking as a protection from the rain, had a cold, moist appearance that made him feel cold, too, when he saw them. A keen air came blowing down the quays, and when he thrust his head out to see what the sky was like, it caught hold of him and caused him to shiver.

"It's damn coul'!" he muttered to himself, thrusting his hands deeply into his pockets, and stamping his feet on the tiles in the porch. His resentment against Esther increased when he reflected that had it not been for her he would not at that moment be standing there, shivering in the wind. There was a comfortable fire in the shop at Ballyreagh, and if it had been raining there, as it was raining here, he would have settled himself in an armchair in the warmth, and would have passed the time talking to Aggie, "gagging" her about her boys, or playing Snap with her, for she wouldn't play devil's cards, or draughts mebbe or dominoes. . . Instead of enjoying

himself in the company of his daughter, and her the grand-looking girl, too, here he was standing in a back-street public-house, in the drenching rain, shivering and shuddering, and all over the head of Esther. . . .

He whistled to himself for a few moments, and then danced on the tiles ; but his efforts to cheer himself were poor efforts, and in a short while he ceased to whistle, and he did not dance any more. He leant against the lintel of the door, and watched the rain dribbling down the roof of the shed in front of him. A lorry went by, laden with sheets of iron, and its wheels made a loud, rattling sound on the square-setts as it passed, and the sheets of iron clattered together in a long, resonant rumble. The horse was steaming, and the driver huddled on the shafts had a bleak face.

"It's enough to deaven you, that noise!" James said to himself, holding his hands against his ears to shut out the sound.

A drove of pigs went by, and a drove of cattle, driven by herds who shouted and thwacked, and thwacked again and shouted. The cattle went on to the ships with little persuasion, but the pigs made a miserable squealing as they were hauled along the gangways by the lugs, or induced to go forward by having their tails twisted or their hides poked by the drovers' sticks. One pig bolted from the herd and ran grunting down the quay, pursued by drovers and hungry-looking, bare-legged lads. James forgot his shivering state and the pelting rain while he watched the pursuit of the squealing pig, and laughed to himself when he saw it stop so suddenly that one of the drovers,

unable to check himself in time, fell over its back. . . . In a little while the beast was captured and led ignominiously back to the boat.

A man came and stood in the porch by James's side.

"That's a soft day," he said.

"Aye, you're right. It is," James replied.

They talked of the rain and the pigs and the cattle and the ships crossing the Channel.

"I was in Englan' a while myself once," said the stranger. "I was workin' on the Tyne . . . I'm a riveter to my trade. Were you ever in Englan' ?"

"I was an odd time or two," James answered. "I've been in America more nor there !"

"Englan's a great place !"

"I daresay it is. America's bigger !"

"Well, now, it's not the bigness that matters. It's the kind of people. There's quare nice people over in Englan'. They're not the kind you get over here !"

"What's the differs ?" James asked.

"Och, there's many a differs. They don't be askin' you what your religion is, for one thing, nor preventin' a man from doin' his work because he's a Cathlik. . . . I'm a Cathlik !"

"Are you now ?"

"Aye. It's the religion I was reared to. No one ever interfered with me because I was a Cathlik in Englan', but in this place . . . well, I'm not workin' the day over the head of it !"

"Why are you not ?"

"Och. A lot of heater-boys started writin' 'To Hell with the Pope' on the side of a ship,

an' I checked them for it, an' the whole of them got up a clan again me, an' I was bate out of the yard. 'You Fenian get, you!' they shouted after me, an' begun cloddin' rivets after me. You would think they were wild savages from the heart of Africa the way they go on. The peelers tried to stop them, but sure, the peelers was afeard of them, an' I was hit over the head with a rivet, an' had me skull cut open. There's the mark of it on my head!" He showed a wound on his crown. "I had to be took to the hospital, an' have it stitched!"

"It looks better now," James said.

"Aye, it's all right, but I daren't go anear the Yard yet. The foreman told me himself to stop away a while. It's aisy enough to say stop away, but where's the money comin' from? . . . They're a warm lot in this town. What do you think of lads that writes 'To Hell with the Pope' on a boat that'll sail the world? There's a nice sort of a thing for fellows to be doin'. Writin' bigotry on a boat that'll go from here til America. You would think they'd be ashamed to let the world know the kind they are, an' would be hidin' it at home, but indeed they have no shame at all. They want the world to know. Are you a Prodesan yourself?"

"I was reared one, but I'm nothin' at all myself!" James answered.

"Ah, now, you ought to be somethin'. That's not right at all. I say myself many's a time, an Or'ngeman's a Christian for all he does! I don't believe in not believin' nothin'. But I was goin' to say, it's quare the way the Or'ngeman carries their

bigotry everywhere. I was over in Lancashire one time. Were you ever in one of them towns where they make cotton ? "

James shook his head. " I was never anywhere but Liverpool," he said.

" Ah, you ought to see them places in Lancashire. They're despert towns. You would think you were lookin' in the bad place, they're that fearful. Smoke an' cinders ! But the people's dacent, kindly people. They are that ! None of your bigotry over there ! You would be surprised now the way the Or'ngemen goes over to them towns, an' starts their wee Or'nge lodges where they're not wanted, an' walk about on the Twelfth of July showin' off their bigotry. The people in Lancashire can't bear them, so they can't. Comin' over here, they say, with your narrow minds, an' disturbin' peaceable people with your Or'nge banners an' your Or'nge drums an' your ould Or'nge minds. That's what they say about them over there. I heard them say it many's a time. An' sure the half of them Or'nge lodges is nothin' but drinkin' clubs an' gamblin' hells. There's Or'nge lodges in Lancashire that a dacent person wouldn't enter. . . . I'll have to go out of this again, to Glasgow or Sunderland, mebbe, an' begin all over. I've often gone before, an' vowed to myself as I sailed down the Lough there, I'd never come back, but I get homesick after a while, an' back I come ! "

" You'd wonder at that now ! "

" Aye, you would, but sure it's the way. I'm quaren fond of this town. It's where I was born an' reared, an' I don't like bein' away from it long.

Sometimes I get that longin' for it, that I'd near go jumpin' mad with joy to hear a drunk Or'ngeman cursin' the Pope in North Street of a Saturday night. It's a clean town this, an' the people's dacent enough if they were let alone by politicians an' scoundrels like that! Are you a Belfast man yourself?"

"I live in Ballyreagh. I was born in Ardglass, but I have friends livin' here!"

"Them places is all right for a trip in the summer time, but it doesn't matter where you go, you're glad to get back here. I'm tryin' to make up my mind now to go to Sunderland, but I tell you it's the hard job, an' my heart's sore with the thought of it. . . . It's not near clearin' up yet?"

The sky had become the colour of ashes, and the rain still steadily fell. The flags had little pools of water lying in the worn places, and James could hear the water falling into the gutters.

"There's no sign of it dryin'!" he said.

The stranger turned up the collar of his coat and prepared to step out of the shelter.

"There's no good of me stoppin' here no longer," he said. "I'll away home to my tay. I wish to my God I was at my work. I come down here to the quay many's a time, an' look across the river at the Yard, an' think to myself it's gran' to be on a boat, puttin' rivets in her side, an' hearin' the hammerin' all around you, an' then to see the boat bein' launched. . . ."

"Sure, you can see that on the Tyne or up the Clyde," James interrupted.

"Ah, it's not the same thing. They can't make the boats over there that we can!" He turned

sharply to James. "Will you come across now to the quay an' have a look at the Yard? There's a liner on the stocks now—it'll be the biggest boat in the world when it's afloat. Sure, it'll occupy your mind while the rain's on!"

James turned up the collar of his coat, and he and the stranger ran across the street, and passed through the sheds until they came to a break on the quay where they could see the shipyard lying on the south side of the river.

"Man, it's gran', isn't it?" the stranger exclaimed enthusiastically.

He pointed to the great wooden palisades sunk in the mud of the Lagan and rising to a great height in the air so that they looked like skeletons. Inside the palisades were roughly shaped lines of metal and timber that would soon be ships, and over these little black figures swarmed continually.

"It's like a hive," said the stranger. "That's what it's like. Them boats is the honey, an' chaps like me is bees!" His voice thickened as he went on. "It near breaks your heart to think a man can't do his work there in peace without a lot of people thumpin' him for the sake of his religion. I wouldn't care a thrush's mick for no rain or nothin, if I was only over there rivetin' that boat! But I'll have to be goin' to Englan' for a bit, I'm afeard. In one of them ships!" He made a motion with his head towards the steamers standing at the quays.

They turned away from the great mass of stocks and steel plates and gantries and giant cranes, where the little black figures went hammering, and passed through the sheds where piles of goods

from all lands lay, and came out again into the broad street.

"I'm shiverin' with the coul'," said James, shuddering as he spoke. "Will you come an' have a drop of whisky with me?"

"Ah, no, thank you," replied the stranger, "I never touch it. It'll soon be time for the Island men to be leavin' their work, an' I want to get home before they start comin' over the bridge an' the ferry. I can't bear to see them comin' from the Yard, an' them all dirty an' sweatin', an' me just wanderin' about, not knowin' what the hell to do with myself. So long to you, mister!"

"So long to you, sir!" James said.

The stranger went away quickly, and James, hunching his shoulders, ran through the rain across the street to the porch of the public-house. "I wonder will they be home yet," he said to himself as he stood shaking the raindrops from his coat. He took his coat off and flapped it in front of him, and then put it on again. "You would think the sky would be drained dry after all this wet!" he said to himself.

The sky showed no sign of clearing. The rain still descended in a murky stream.

"I'm perished," said James, and then he turned towards the inner door of the public-house. "I'll go in an' have a drop to keep me warm," he murmured.

CHAPTER XX

Mrs. Martin and Esther set off to see the shop in the Albert Bridge Road immediately after they had eaten their mid-day meal. It was late in the afternoon when they reached it, for they dallied on the way to look in the windows of the big houses in the centre of the city, and while they were discussing the purchase-price of the business with the proprietor, the rain began to fall. They examined the stock and the account books, and made inquiries about the amount of the turn-over and the radius of the trade and the number of competitors in the neighbourhood, and had private conversations together while the proprietor waited in another room. Esther had practically resolved to purchase the business, and Mrs. Martin felt inclined to support her in her resolve, but she advised her not to be precipitated in making a decision. She might obtain a reduction on the purchase-price if she showed some shyness about taking over the business; in any event, it would be well to obtain a report from Messrs. Stubbs' Inquiry Agency before making a definite decision.

"An' it wouldn't be a bad plan to come over two or three times, without tellin' him you're comin', an' just hing about the street watchin' how many people comes in an' out of the shop.

I would take a week to do it if I were you, an' then you'd get a fair notion of what sort of trade he does. The good nights in Belfast is Friday an' Saturday—the Island men get their pay on Friday —an' them nights'll mebbe be partic'lar good, but I wouldn't bother much about them. I'd just see what sort of trade he does on the other nights. His accounts seem all right, but you never know with them things. Some people's quaren handy at makin' up their books ! "

Esther told the owner of the shop that she was very much inclined to buy the business from him, but that she would like to take a week to think over it before she made up her mind one way or the other. She thought that the price he was asking for it was too high ; and so on and so forth. " I'll let you know for certain this night week," she said. The rain still fell steadily and so the proprietor of the shop invited them to stay to tea with him and his wife. " Mebbe, by the time you've had it," he said, " the rain'll be stopped ! " They thanked him and accepted the invitation, and so it was that they did not reach Jamesey's lodgings until late in the evening. Esther had not intended to go into Mrs. Luke's house with Martha, but when she heard that Jamesey had gone to bed, she consented. " He was tired after his walk," Mrs. Luke said, " an' he got a bit of a wettin' in the rain—it was nothin' to speak of, for he was near home when it came on—but he thought he'd better go upstairs an' lie down ! "

" We've had our tay, thank you, Mrs. Luke ! " Mrs. Martin said, as she and Esther went into the parlour together, and sat down before the fire.

They sat talking of the shop and of ways of improving its appearance. "It's too crammed up thegether," said Mrs. Martin. "You can't see the things, they're that packed. People's eyes can't take in a lot all at once! . . ."

Esther told her sister of her dream of Jamesey's future, and of her grief at the ruin that had come upon it when she heard that he could not bear to have her staying in the same lodgings as himself.

"I near thought of givin' everything up," she said, "for what 'ud be the good of it, if I hadn't Jamesey to share it?"

"It's a quare thing," Mrs. Martin replied, "how you've set your heart on Jamesey, Esther, an' you never thought a great deal of Aggie, an' now James has set his heart on Aggie, an' hardly takes no notice of his son. That's quaren quare! I wonder if wee Esther had lived, would she 'a' been my favourite! You mind her, don't you?"

"I do, indeed!" Esther answered.

"She was the nice wee child, her!" Martha continued, "an' James was quarely cut up when she died!"

"Aye, he was. I mind that well!"

It was quite dark outside, but they did not draw the blind nor did they light the lamp. They sat in the firelight and talked or were silent as was their mood.

"Do you think Jamesey'll ever be the same to me again, Martha?" Esther asked after they had been sitting still for a while.

"I don't know, Esther. You'll have to wait patient. That's all you can do!"

"I wish James had never 'a' come home,"

Esther said bitterly. "We were quaren contented thegether til he come an' disturbed us all, an' now it'll never be the same even if he goes away again!"

"That's true enough!"

"We were as peaceable as we could be, an' all of a sudden he comes an' there's nothin' but trouble an' discontent! . . ."

"An' yet, Esther, he does nothin' to make it, nothin' that you can see. That's what so quare about him. He's like a Jenny-Joe of a man, he's that quiet about the house . . . but there's somethin' about him that causes disturbance. I don't know what it is exactly—it's nothin' he does—it's just him himself somehow! . . . You'd be surprised the way he goes on about Aggie. She can turn him round her wee finger, so she can, an' she orders him about, an' he says nothin'. He just does what she tells him. He's afeard of his life of her findin' out anythin' about you an' him, an' that gives me a quare holt on him!" She paused when she said this, and then she laughed lightly. "I get a kind of pleasure out of that feelin'," she said. "It was him that used to do the orderin' about!" She told again the story of his triumph over old Mrs. Crothers. "That was the kind of him," she said, "an' now it's me that does the orderin', an' Aggie, too! You have to wait a long while for your payment sometimes, but you get it one day! It's not what I expected. I thought he'd be like himself. . . . I hardly know what I expected, but I was greatly disappointed when he did come. I could 'a' bore it rightly if he'd gone away again but now . . . och, well, you get used

to things, don't you ? You think you would never be able to put up with something, an' then you have to, an' you're able to put up with it easy enough, an' then in a while you wonder you ever wanted anything different ! "

She put a lump of coal on the fire, and poked the cinders and dust from the lower bars.

" The rain's never stopped yet," she said, glancing towards the window.

" It's set in for the night, I'm thinkin'," said Esther.

They remained quiet for a long time. Esther had slipped from her chair on to the floor, and was sitting with her head leaning against Martha's legs. They watched the flames curl about the coal until the big piece which Martha had just put on the fire broke.

" Martha," Esther said at last, " did you know James was leavin' you that time ? "

" Aye, Esther, he toul' me he was ! "

" An' you never said nothin' ! "

" What 'ud 'a' been the good of sayin' anything ? "

" Did he tell you anything about me when he went ? "

" Aye ! "

" Was it that he didn't want me no more ? "

" Aye, Esther ! "

" An' you never toul' me that either ! "

" No ! "

" You had a kind thought for me, Martha, but I wonder was it a kind thing you done ! "

" Many's a time I wonder that myself, Esther. You never know ! "

"Does Jamesey know his da left you?"

"He's guessed it," Mrs. Martin replied. "He couldn't help guessin' it when his da come home, but I won't admit it to him. He asks me questions about his da, an' sometimes he says straight out, "Ma, did my da run away from you?" but I never tell him. I know he knows in his mind that James left me, but I have a kind of a pride that keeps me from tellin' him plain that he did. Aggie never guesses. I suppose it's because her da's that wrapped up in her, an' she likes him. If he was to treat her the way he treats Jamesey, I daresay she'd guess quick enough!"

"I daresay. It's quare you never find out the truth about people til you begin to hate them, Martha!"

"Och, indeed, Esther, an' you don't find it out then. You never find it out about no one—yourself nor nobody. There's a hundred men in one man, an' all of them different, an' anyone of them is him, but he's not anyone of them. You'd spend your life with a man an' not know a bit of him, an' he'd spend his life with you, an' be the same. You have to take people as they are the minute you see them, an' not be hoardin' up hate against them because mebbe they'll not be the same the next time you see them!"

"Ah, sure, that's not natural, Martha. You can't help your feelin's, an' if a person's done you a bad turn, you want to do them one back, an' anyway you never forget it!"

Mrs. Martin patted her on the head. "Well, mebbe you don't," she said, "but sure you're only wearin' out your mind rememberin' it!"

There was a sound as of some one tapping on the window, and she looked up though she thought that it must be the wind blowing the laurel leaves against the pane.

"God save us," she exclaimed, starting up so suddenly that she threw Esther on to the floor, "there's a man starin' in the window!"

She walked across the room, and as she did so she saw that the man was her husband. "Och, it's James!" she said. "He near scared the wits out of me, peepin' in like that. I thought it was a ghost or something. Sit still awhile, Esther, til I let him in!"

She made signs through the glass to her husband to go to the door, and then drew down the blind.

"You'll not be put out at him comin' in, will you, Esther?" she asked, as she went to the door of the room to let her husband enter the house, "because if you think you will, I'll take him in the kitchen. I can't think what's brought him up. Will you be awkward, do you think?"

Esther hesitated. She did not wish to meet James again, but she did not wish to show that she did not. "I'll be all right," she said, rising from the floor on which she had lain since Martha had started up from her seat, and going to an armchair at the side of the room. "Mebbe, he'll want to talk private to you, Martha!" she added. "If he does I can go on up home. It'll not stop rainin' the night, an' I might as well go now as later!"

"Wait a while an' we'll see!" Mrs. Martin replied, going to the street door.

Esther wondered what she should say when

James came in. Would it be better for her to sit still in the shadow, saying nothing, or would it be better to speak civilly to him, bidding him good-evening and even asking him how his health was, inquiring after Aggie, and then take her leave of them ? . . . While she was wondering, she heard Martha's voice in the hall in angry expostulation, and then the door of the parlour opened abruptly, and James reeled into the room, staring stupidly about him as he blinked before the light, and breathing heavily. She stood up at his entry, for she saw that he was drunk, and she knew that he had come with no good will to her. Martha followed him into the room, shutting the door behind her.

" This is a nice state of affairs," she said to him in an angry tone. " Comin' here like that, an' bringin' discredit on us. What'll Mrs. Luke think if she hears Jamesey's da come to see him dead drunk ? "

He ignored what his wife said to him, and staggered across the room to where Esther was standing silently waiting.

" Get out to hell er this ! " he mumbled thickly at her.

His foot caught in a goat skin mat and he tripped forward, but did not fall. Esther felt afraid of him, but even in her fear, she felt like laughing as he staggered over the mat. She wondered that Martha, standing with scowling countenance against the door, did not burst out into roars.

" Quit to hell er this," he was saying to her again.

But how could she take any notice of him

when he was falling about the room in that foolish fashion ? If he did not mind what he was doing, he would have the lamp over as sure as death, and mebbe set the house on fire, and Jamesey upstairs in his bed. . . . If the house were to go on fire, and she could save Jamesey's life, and her mebbe lose her own . . . but then she wouldn't be able to start the shop. . . .

" D'you hear me ? " she heard James shouting at her, and then she felt his hand on her arm, and he was dragging her across the room towards the door.

" Mind what you're doin', James ! " Martha exclaimed, coming to them, and disengaging his hand from her arm. " You're makin' the fine show of yourself, I must say. What brought you here at all ? "

" Let—let her go hell er this ! " he replied.

" See ! Thash all ! See ! Go hell er this ! Don't want her interferin'—interferin' my fam'ly, see ! Thash why ? Now, du unnerstan', eh ? "

" Ah, you're talkin' blether ! " Martha snapped at him. " An' if you're goin' to start gettin' drunk, James Martin, let me tell you it'll not be long afore I clear you out of Ballyreagh. D'you hear me, man ? "

" Couldn't . . . clear me out, see ! Wouldn't . . . go—go ! Nothin' to do with you, see ! My business, see ! My business ! Don't want her interfere my fam'ly no more. No more. Aggie or no one ! Jamesey neither ! " He turned to Esther. " Come on er that ! Don't wanna speaksh to you again, du hear ? See ! Don't wanna ! . . . "

She pushed him from her. "Leave me alone, James Martin!" she said. "I don't want you near me!"

He crumpled up on the sofa, and lay there for a few moments glaring at her fatuously. "Thash nicsh thing to do!" he mumbled. "Mush say!" He got up awkwardly, and would have gone to her again but Martha interposed. She took hold of his arm, and led him to a seat at the fire on the other side of the room from that where Esther was.

"Sit down," she said, "an' try an' behave yourself. Does Aggie know where you are?"

He said that Aggie imagined he had gone for a walk to Newtownards, and that he would not return home until late.

"Well, you've gone a bit fardher nor she imagined," his wife replied. "You'll not get home the night, an' you in that state. I wouldn't for the world anyone in Ballyreagh seen you like that. What would Aggie say if you were to go in the house an' you drunk, eh? I'd like you to tell me that!"

He understood the purport of her questions, and he shook his head at her. "Not goin' home like this!" he said. "Not like this! Go home to-morra—sober again, see! Thash when I go home!"

"Oh, indeed!" she said, standing before him with her hands resting on her hips. "So you're goin' home the morrow, are you. An' where are you goin' to stay the night, I'd like to be informed?"

"Stop here! . . ."

"Well, indeed, you'll do nothin' of the sort.

Mrs. Luke wouldn't have you in her house, an' I wouldn't blame her neither. An' what about Aggie left by her lone in Ballyreagh ? I suppose you never considered that ? A young slip of a girl left by herself in the house. An' then you go about lettin' on you love her ! "

" Do love her. 'Strue's death ! . . ."

" Aye, it's a quare kind of love that leaves her to go an' get drunk. Are you not ashamed of yourself to be disgracin' your daughter that you're always makin' so much of ? . . ."

" I'm not disgrashin' her. I didn't mean to get drunk. See ? Thash's fact. I didn't mean ! . . ."

" Well, you are anyway, whether you meant to or not ! "

" I come here to tell her go 'way—go 'way althegether—never come back no more. Don't want her interferin' ! . . ."

" Ah, well, you can't have everything you want, an' Esther's not goin' to put herself out to suit you, my man. Sit down, Esther dear, til we talk this matter over ! "

" I'd better be goin' on up home, Martha, hadn't I ? " Esther said.

" You will not, indeed. Sit down an' content yourself awhile ! He's not in a fit state to talk about anything, it's true, but it's the best sort of condition I can get him in now, an' you're mebbe unlikely to meet again for a long time ! " She turned to her husband and spoke to him sharply " Sit up, James, an' try an' sober yourself ! " She put out her hand and touched his coat. " Dear bless me," she exclaimed, " you're ringin' wet.

Here, off with your coat with you! You must be demented to be wanderin' about in that state!" She caught hold of him and hauled him into a standing position. "I wonder the peelers didn't lift you," she added, as she tried to take his coat off.

He could not stand still, and so she could not release him from his coat.

"Here, Esther," she said, as she tried to hold him straight, "come on, an' lend me a hand with him!"

"I'd rather not handle him, Martha! . . ."

"It'll do you no harm to help me off with his coat. You'd do that much for your bitterest enemy if he was in need of a hand! Here, pull his arm out of the sleeve while I kept a holt on him!"

Esther did as she was bid, and between them they freed the helpless man from his sodden coat.

They let him fall back into the chair, and he lay there, with his head hanging loosely on to his chest.

"He'll be asleep on us," Mrs. Martin said, "if we're not careful. Did ever you see such an a man in all your born days? His trousers is ringin' too, and his boots!" She knelt down and took his boots off and laid them in front of the fire to dry. "He'll be in a fever," she continued, "if he's let go out in them wet trousers!" She stood up and considered what she should do. His eyes were closed and his head was nodding, and his breath came in loud regular grunts. "There's nothin' for it," she said at last, "but for him to stop here the night. I'll go an' tell Mrs. Luke

We can mebbe make up a bed for him here in the parlour, an' leave him to sleep off the drink!" She walked to the door, holding her hand to her cheek as if she were still pondering over her course of action. "Ochone," she said, going out of the room, "it's a quare trouble a man is!"

Esther stood before the fire, gazing at the drunken man sprawling on the chair. He had come to town to wreck her happiness not knowing that his son had already wrecked it, but she felt no anger against him now. She began to pity him. Something in that dull brutish mind was making an effort to capture the love of a young girl, to appear fine and manly in her eyes. "That's why he wants to be redd of me," she said to herself. "Aggie would mebbe turn from him if she knew about us!" She moved from the fire, and stood over him. He slipped a little in the chair as she did so, and she thought that he was about to tumble on to the floor. She caught hold of him and lifted him gently into a secure position. "You're a poor bargain for any woman, James Martin!" she murmured as she did so.

She bent down and felt his socks, and then she took them off. "They're wet enough to perish him," she thought, as she did so.

She heard the noise of the door being opened while she was removing the second sock.

"I'm takin' his socks off," she said, without looking up. "His feet's as coul' as ice!"

She put the socks in the fender, and then turned to look at her sister, who, she imagined, had entered the room; but Martha was not there. It was Jamesey, pale and full of sleep, who stood

in the doorway, staring in astonishment at the spectacle of his aunt kneeling on the floor attending to his father.

"I thought my ma was here!" he said stupidly.

"She's in the kitchen, talkin' to Mrs. Luke, Jamesey! Your da's here!"

He did not reply. He stood staring at her as if he could not believe that he was not dreaming.

"Is it you?" he said.

"Aye, Jamesey!"

He shut the door and leant against the head of the sofa. He stood there rubbing his eyes, and then he turned to her and said. "What brought you here?"

She did not answer. "I'll go if you like, Jamesey," she said instead.

"What brought you here?" he repeated.

"I came with your ma!"

"An' him—what brought him here?"

"I don't know, Jamesey. He only came a wee while ago!"

He did not speak to her immediately. Then his anger swept through him, and he walked towards his father.

"Well, he can go on out of this again as quick as he likes," he said, "an' you with him!"

She caught hold of his arm, and restrained him. "Don't, Jamesey," she said, "he's asleep! . . ."

"He's drunk, that's what he is. You can see it! . . ."

"Well, mebbe, Jamesey, but don't disturb him, it's a pity of him, an' your ma'll tell you why he come. Don't be puttin' yourself out about me.

I'll go now, an' I'll not trouble you again if you don't want me, though. . . ."

She stopped in her speech, and looked at him, but his eyes had no kindness in them, and so she turned away.

"I'm sorry I bothered you, Jamesey," she said, and she went to the door. "Good-night, son!"

He did not answer.

"Had you not better get back to your bed," she said, opening the door. "You'll get your death standin' there in the draught!"

He did not speak nor did he move.

"Good-night, son!" she said again.

But still he did not answer.

CHAPTER XXI

MRS. MARTIN came into the room carrying bedclothes and pillows. "You're not goin', Esther?" she said, and then she saw Jamesey. "Son, dear," she exclaimed, "what are you doin' downstairs, an' you not dressed?"

"Ah, I'm all right," Jamesey answered.

She threw the bedclothes on to the sofa and went up to him and took hold of his arm. "Away to your bed this minute," she said sharply. "I've just got you better, an' now you want to throw yourself back again. Quit actin' the child, Jamesey!"

He pulled his arm from her grasp and spoke petulantly to her. "I tell you I'm all right. I'm not goin' to bed a while yet. What's my da doin' here, an' her?" He pointed with his thumb at Esther.

"Well, if you'll not go to your bed," she said, "you can just sit as close to the fire as you can get. Here! Sit down now and warm yourself, an' don't be stirrin' til I tell you. I'm going to make your da's bed! . . ."

He got up from the chair into which she had forced him and shouted at her in astonishment. "Bed! Is he stoppin' here? . . ."

"Aye, indeed he is. You see rightly, don't you,

that he's not in a fit state to be let out of the house. Sit down now, like a good lad, an' don't be upsettin' yourself about nothin' ! "

She made him sit down again, and he sat quietly in the armchair, gazing into the fire, as if he were bemused.

" Now, Esther, where are you goin' ? " Mrs. Martin demanded of her sister who still stood in the doorway. " Shut the door an' come on in. Dear knows I have enough to do without spendin' the whole night coaxin' one an' another to sit down a while an' behave like intelligent people ! "

Esther shut the door and stood with her back to it.

" Jamesey doesn't want me to stop here," she said, " an' so I was just goin' to my lodgin's ! "

" There's lots of things Jamesey doesn't want, but he has to have them. Sit down til I'm ready to talk to you both. Draw that chair up to the fire there ! "

" Jamesey ! . . ."

" Och, quit clatterin' about Jamesey. What is he only a lump of a lad that's as headstrong as his da was before him. Am I to spend my days givin' intil one man an' then til another. I give intil his da, an' what was my thanks for it. He left me ! . . ."

Jamesey jumped up from his seat as she spoke. " Then it is true, ma ! I knew it all the time. He run away from you ! . . ."

" Aye, indeed he did, Jamesey, but he come crawlin' back again. There's a lot of his temper in you, my son, an' you'd do well not to be followin'

his example for fear you have to come crawlin' back one time. You're proud, Jamesey, not that I mind that, for pride's a good thing in a man or a woman, but you're worse nor proud—you're self-contented. You're settin' up yourself as judge of your da an' judge of your Aunt Esther an' judge of me—aye you are, Jamesey, you know you are!" He had made a gesture to denote that this was not true, but she would not let him speak. "An' what is it at all? Only hurt pride, that's all. It's me that has the right to be judgin'—not you! An' I don't want to judge no one!"

She spread the bedclothes on the sofa and settled the pillows comfortably, and while she did so, no one spoke. There were no sounds in the room but the heavy, dull snoring of the drunken man, and the crackling of wood on the fire, and the rustle of the bedclothes as Mrs. Martin beat them into a comfortable shape. Esther sat between Jamesey and his father, but she did not look at either of them, and Jamesey leant forward so that his head rested on his hands that were supported by his knees. Mrs. Martin stood back from the sofa to look at the bed she had made, and then, satisfied that it would serve for her husband, she turned away from it and came to the fire.

"Your da's drunk," she said to Jamesey. "Well, who's hurt the most by that? Not you. Not Esther. Not Aggie. Not him, either, but me. I'm hurt, not you! But you're not thinkin' of me, none of you. Your da's thinkin' of Aggie! Esther's thinkin' of you! You're thinkin of' yourself . . . yes, you are, Jamesey. An' what

am I thinkin' of ? Aye, indeed ! I'd be the poor woman if I was to wander about thinkin' of my troubles an' my pride an' how I was hurt by this one an' that one. I'm too ould to be hatin' people, Jamesey, an' when you're my age, son, you'll not be hatin' people unless your mind's a rotten mind. Your wee hates'll just drop off you like an ould shawl that slips from your showlders when you're not lookin', an' you'll be knowin' well that your pleasure is to be goin' about with as good a heart as you can. You're in anger against your da, but what good'll that do ? Am I to turn him away because you don't like him ? Am I to set him wanderin' the world til you're tired of hatin' him ? An' your Aunt Esther, am I never to say a word til her again because you've fell out with her ? Do you think because you're not satisfied with people, that I'm not to be satisfied, too, an' that I must fall out with them when you do ! . . ."

" Ma, you're not fair ! . . ."

" I'm fair enough. Your da's afeard of his life of Aggie gettin' to know about him an' your Aunt Esther, an' he doesn't want me to have anything more to do with her, nor her to have anything to do with you or any of us. That's what he come up to Belfast for, to make Esther go away from us. He was orderin' her out of the house when he first come in. All of yous orderin' an' orderin' an' never askin' my leave. Well, there'll be an end of that, master James, an' your da'll know it, too, when he's sober. I'm the master in my family, an' it's me that decides what to be done in my house—not you nor your da nor no one.

If I want your da at home I'll have him an' I'll not ask your leave. If I don't want him I'll turn him out, an' I'll not ask Aggie's leave. An' if I want to have Esther near me I'll not ask the leave of any of you to have her, your da nor you nor no one! . . ." She stopped suddenly in her tirade, and went to her husband. "Here, Jamesey," she said, "come an' give me a hand to carry him to the sofa. He's like a lump of lead!"

"Will I help you, Martha?" Esther said meekly.

"Aye, you can lend a hand, too. It'll need the whole of us!"

They lifted the sleeping man and carried him to the sofa. He muttered incoherently as they did so, but he did not wake up.

"You can pull off his trousers, Jamesey," Mrs. Martin said, "an' me an' your Aunt Esther'll sit at the fire while you do it. They're wet through, an' he'll be foundered if they're let stay on him all night. Dear knows where he's been wanderin' since he left home. I'll have to send word to Aggie that her da's here or she'll be frightened out of her life. I'll get Mrs. Luke's wee lad to go down to the General for me an' send off a telegram to her!" She went out of the room as she spoke.

Esther stood with her back to the sofa where Jamesey was attending to his father. She heard him wrap the bedclothes round the sleeper, and then she heard him say, "He'll do rightly!" She went over to the sofa and joined Jamesey. "Will he be safe there, do you think?" she said. "Are you not afeard of him tumblin' off!"

He walked away from her and sat down in the

chair in which his father had lain. "It'll do him no harm if he does fall off," he said. "It'll mebbe sober him!"

She saw that he was not responsive to her, and so she did not say any more. She, too, sat down again in silence to wait for Martha's return. In a little while Mrs. Martin came back. She looked at her husband to make sure that he was well wrapped up, and then she joined her sister and her son.

"I'm sorry I spoke so bitter to you, Jamesey!" she said. "I let out more nor I meant to say, but you provoked me. . . . Well, it doesn't matter now. I wonder if it's any good sayin' anything more the night. Our tempers is not quiet, an' we're bitter with one another, an' disturbed by your da. . . . What was it you come down for, son? You were wantin' me for something, weren't you?"

He nodded his head, but he did not tell her of his want. He sat moodily gazing into the fire.

"What was it, son, you were wantin'?" she repeated.

"Ah, it doesn't matter now," he replied.

"Yes, it does matter. . . ."

"I was only wantin' a wee crack with you, that was all. I hadn't seen you since the mornin', and I was tired of bein' upstairs by my lone, so I thought I'd come down a while an' talk to you, an' when I opened the door you weren't here!"

"No," Esther interjected, "he didn't find you here, Martha, he only found me an' his da. Don't be sayin' anything hard til him. I'd be right

an' sorry to think I brought disturbance between the two of you. . . ."

"You'll never do that, Esther. Me an' Jamesey's too near one another for anybody to separate us, aren't we, son?"

"Aye, ma!"

They were silent again, and then Esther got up from her seat.

"Well," she said, "I'd better be goin'. I'm doin' no good sittin' here. . . . I'm only doin' harm!"

Martha rose, too. "We can do no more the night," she said. "We'll see what the morrow'll bring up. But don't be makin' little of yourself that way, Esther. Talkin' about you doin' harm, an' blether like that. I'll come to the door with you, an' if it's not wet, I'll mebbe walk up to the head of the street!"

"Ah, don't bother yourself, Martha. Sure, I know my way!" Esther said. She looked at Jamesey for a few seconds, but he made no sign to show that he was aware that she was about to go home. She went up to him and held out her hand to him. "Good-night, Jamesey!" she said.

He stirred uneasily in his seat, and then looked up at her awkwardly. "Eh?" he said, not because he had not heard what she said, but to cover his confusion.

"Good-night, Jamesey!"

"Oh! Good-night!" he replied, turning away without taking her hand.

She waited for a moment or two, hoping that he would relent, but he did not do so, and then she went out of the room, followed by Martha.

"I near checked him for his unmannerliness, Esther!" Mrs. Martin whispered to her, as they stood in the hall, "but I thought I'd better not say anything. It'll be best for him to have his fill of anger, an' then he'll mebbe alter. You do no good by talkin' to people when they're like that. You stir them up, an' make them worse. You know yourself that when you've some terrible grief on your mind, nothin's no good but to be let you cry your eyes out, an' it's that way with Jamesey. A thing's happened to him that he never thought of, an' it's made him feel sick in his mind, but he's a healthy fellow, Jamesey, an' he'll be better in a while!" She opened the door and looked out into the street. "Dear bless us," she said, "it's still rainin'. I hope to my goodness that wee lad of Mrs. Luke's'll not get a drenchin'. I give him coppers to take the tram, but wee lads is never dependable, an' I wouldn't be surprised but he'll walk the length of the way there an' back, an' put the coppers in his pocket! Will you be all right, do you think, Esther? Rap yourself well up!"

"I'm rightly, thank you, Martha!"

"Will I lend you an umbrella or anything?"

"Aye, I would thank you for the loan of one. I'll bring it back first thing in the mornin'."

"Come in as soon as you can," she said, handing the umbrella to Esther. "We'll have a long talk thegether, James an' you an' Jamesey an' me, an' see if we can't make some sort of peace instead of all this wranglin' an' ill-feelin', for dear knows, we have our lives before us yet, an' it's a poor prospect if we've nothin' better to think of nor

fightin' an' bad blood! Good-night to you, Esther!"

"Good-night, Martha!"

"Mind you hold your dress up out of the wet. The road's runnin' with the water!"

"Aye, I'll mind myself. Good-night to you!"

"Good-night, Esther!"

She stood in the doorway for a few moments looking after her sister, and then she shut the door and returned to the parlour. James was snoring lustily, and her son was sitting in the same position as he was when she left the room. She went over to her husband and put her fingers on his nostrils. "Quit that noise you ould dunderer you!" she said. He turned on his side and shut his mouth and slept quietly.

"It's awful to hear a man snorin' that way, she said, going to her seat, and drawing it near to Jamesey. "It would near drive you distracted to live in that noise!"

He did not make any answer, but still sat staring in front of him.

"It's a soft night," she said. "I hope it'll clear up in the mornin'!"

He turned his head as if he had suddenly become aware of her presence. "Is it still rainin'?" he asked.

"Aye. The sky's floodin'. Did you have a good walk the day, son?"

"I had a bit of a walk!"

"You didn't go an' tire yourself, I hope, or get drenched?"

"No!"

"That's right. Draw nearer to the fire. You

haven't got your slippers on. Now, isn't that foolish of you! Where are they?"

"They're upstairs in the bedroom," he replied.

"Well, put your feet on the fender there, an' keep them warm til I get them for you. I'll not be a minute!"

"Sure, you needn't trouble!"

"What trouble is it? Content yourself now til I come back!"

She returned in a little while with the slippers and put them on his feet. "That'll do you rightly," she exclaimed when she had finished.

"Thank you, ma!" he said, and then was silent again.

"I went an' had a look at that shop your Aunt Esther was talkin' about," she remarked after a few moments. "It's a fine-lookin' place. I think she'll buy it. The man wants a tidy price for it, but I think he'll mebbe take less!" She paused, but he did not make any comment. "It has a good many rooms in it," she added, "more nor she can use. She'll be quaren lonesome in a big house like that! Would you like a wee drop of hot milk or anything?"

"No, thank you, ma!"

"Will I not get you a bit of soda bread and a drop of tay?"

"I don't want anything, thank you!"

"Mebbe you're as well without it. There's some people doesn't sleep well if they take anything to eat before goin' to bed. It would be quaren near your work, that shop. Are you sure you don't want anything?"

"Aye, ma!"

"All right, then! Dear-a-dear, but that's a wild night. Do you hear the wind rattlin' the windows, an' the rain comin' down? It's a pity of any poor man hasn't got a home this night!"

He nodded assent.

"Your da was out many's a night the like of this one, walkin' the streets!"

"Well, that was his own doin', wasn't it?"

"Aye, indeed it was, Jamesey, but many's a thing is our own doin' that's bitter hard for all that. He's a seen a deal of trouble that man, son!"

"Has he?"

"Aye, he has. I hope you'll never see as much. Your da was a quare man, Jamesey. A wild, restless spirit he had, an' was never content, but must be roamin' the world!"

"His roamin' hasn't done him much good by the look of him!"

"No. Somethin' must 'a' been the matter with him. He wasn't always like that, son. He was a proud man, quick in his temper an' strong. I never seen him the worse for liquor before this day, son, an' I know rightly what's brought him to it. He's heart-feard, that's what he is!"

"What's he afeard of?"

"Aggie!"

Jamesey began to laugh when he heard her say that. It seemed to him to be ludicrous that anyone should be afraid of his sister—a bit of a girl like that!

"Heth, you may laugh," said his mother, "an' mebbe it's laughable to think of, but it's true for all that. I don't know what story he's told her

about himself, an' I don't much care, but he's told her somethin', an' he's afeard of his life of her findin' out it's not true. She never asks where he was all the time he was away from home an' she never dreams he run away an' left me to look after myself, an' her just comin' on me ! . . ."

"It was a dirty act for any man to do, to go away an' leave his wife, an' her goin' to have a child, so it was ! "

She put out her hand to him, and took hold of his and clasped it tightly. "Aye, son, it was indeed ! But it was done, an' there's an end of it ! "

He got up and began to pace backwards and forwards, with his hands thrust deeply into his pockets.

"It's not the end of it," he said. "There has to be punishment when men misbehave themselves, hasn't there ? "

She turned towards him, and smiled at him. "Sure, what's the use of punishment ? It doesn't undo anything that's done, an' it only makes things bitterer nor they were ! . . ."

"Aye, that's fine ould women's talk, that ! " he interrupted.

She got up slowly from her chair and gave a little groan as she did so. "Ochone," she said, "I'm gettin' ould, surely. My bones is sluggard ! . . . Mebbe it is, Jamesey, mebbe it is ! You'd better come off to bed now, son, an' not be missin' your sleep. Let me have a look at you ! "

She drew his face down and looked into his eyes.

"Aye, you're gettin' better quick," she said.

"You'll be all right in a day or two, an' back again at your work. I daresay you'll be glad to get back to the Island. Dear-a-dear, that wind an' rain! Good-night, son!"

She kissed him, and he went towards the door.

"Will I not sit up with you awhile?" he asked, standing with his hand on the knob of the door.

"Och, no, son! I'll be goin' to bed myself in a wee minute!"

He nodded his head towards his father. "Will he be all right, do you think?"

"I expect he will," she said. "I'll put a chair near him before I go up to bed to keep him from coupin' off the sofa. Don't stand about in the draught, son, or I'll have you sick again!"

"Good-night, ma!"

"Good-night, son!"

He shut the door behind him and went upstairs to his bed. His mother remained sitting in front of the fire for some time after he left the room. She sat with her hands folded in her lap, and did not move. Her eyes were fixed on the face of the clock, but she was not counting the time. The fire burnt down and the room became cold. She got up from her chair and walked over to the sofa where her husband lay in a thick sleep. She stood over him looking down on the heavy, coarsened face. He had turned again, and was clutching one of the blankets tightly in his fist.

"It's quaren quare," she said, and then she put the lamp out, and went upstairs to her bedroom.

CHAPTER XXII

In the morning Mrs. Martin rose early and went downstairs to the parlour to waken her husband. He looked about him uneasily until she told him where he was, and then he lay back again on the sofa and stretched himself and yawned heavily. "I'm terrible dry," he complained, and then added that his head was splitting. She went to the kitchen and brought a glass of water to him, and waited silently while he drank it.

"I suppose you remember the state you were in last night?" she said, as she took the glass from him and put it aside.

"Was I very bad?" he replied.

"You were that drunk you could hardly control yourself. I don't know what Aggie'll say about it when she hears! . . ."

He sat up sharply on the sofa and stared at her miserably. "She never knew I was comin' here," he said. "She'll be distracted mad at me not comin' home! . . ." He got out of the bed and started searching for his clothes. "Where's my things?" he demanded. "I'll have to be back quick. God save us, she must 'a' been scared out of her seven senses all night!"

"You needn't bother yourself," she exclaimed. "I sent a telegram to her last night to tell her you

were here, an' your clothes is in the kitchen dryin' fornent the range. Get back into your bed, will you, till I have a talk with you ! "

He got into the bed again, and sat waiting for her to speak.

" It wasn't very considerate of you," she continued, " to leave a young girl by herself all night ! . . ."

" Sure, I didn't know I was goin' to be out all night ! I thought I'd be back before late. That's the truth I'm tellin' you, as sure as you're standin' there. I got afeard when she read out your letter sayin' that Esther was stoppin' here, an' Jamesey an' her goin' to take a shop thegether, an' I thought mebbe they'd be tellin' Aggie everything about . . . well, you understand, don't you, the feelin' I had ? An' then I said to Aggie I was in great need of a stretch, an' I was goin' for a walk, an' she begun gaggin' me, an' lettin' on she didn't believe I was any sort of a walker at all, an' I said I'd walk to Newtownards an' back, an' she said I couldn't do it. That suited me gran', for I meant to come to Belfast by train, an' if I was late gettin' home, she'd think I was walkin' the walk. I toul' her I could walk to Belfast an' back as easy as anything. . . ."

" Did you, indeed ? "

" Aye, I did, an' so I could if she dared me. I walked bigger walks nor that many's a time in America ! "

" An' what made you get drunk ? "

" I didn't mean that, Martha. I did not in sang ! I come here in the day time when you were out—you can ask the woman yourself if you

disbelieve me—an' she toul' me you wouldn't be back til your tay-time, an' she asked me to come in an' wait a while, but I didn't want to sit here that length, partic'lar as she said Jamesey would be comin' back in a wee while, so I thanked her an' said I would come again in the evenin'. I went down to the quays, an' it started to pour, an' I took shelter in a public-house. I was standin' there a long while, shiverin' an' gettin' coul' an' wet, an' I said to myself a wee drop of whisky would warm me up, an' I went in an' had one, an' the rain kep' on comin' down in bucketfuls, an' I had another wee drop, an' I was angry about Esther an' afeard about Aggie, an' one thing an' another, an' I don't hardly know what I was doin', but I mind rightly I was toul' to get out of the public-house quick or the peelers 'ud be after them for servin' a drunk man, an' then I don't mind how I got here. . . I mind lookin' in the windy there, an' seein' you an' Esther sittin' very comfortable to yourselves before the fire, an' me out there in the wringin' wet, an' I got beyond myself. . . ."

"Well, of course, James," she said, "if you didn't mean to get drunk that makes a differs, only you know I couldn't keep a drunkard in the house!"

He protested that he was no drunkard. "I never put a drop across my lips the whole while I was in Ballyreagh, did I now? Did I? I wouldn't let the smell of it be on me, an' Aggie about!"

She got up from her seat as he said this. "I'll go an' get your clothes," she said, "an' you can dress yourself, an' have your breakfast. You'll have to go back to Ballyreagh as quick as you can."

"Ah, sure, that's what I want to do!"

"But you an' Jamesey an' Esther an' me'll have to have a serious conversation thegether before you go. We might as well get our minds clear as not, an' we'll mebbe not get another chance like this!"

She brought his clothes to him and he began to dress.

"What'll I tell Aggie?" he said. "She'll wonder at me bein' here!"

"Ah, that's easy enough," she replied. "You can tell her you walked on from Newtownards to Belfast just to show her what you could do, an' you got drenched through, an' thought you might as well come on here an' see Jamesey, an' I made you stop the night for fear you'd get your death of coul'. I daresay you've toul' her many's a thing, an' it'll not hurt you to tell her another!"

"It's as you please!" he said.

"I've sent word to Esther," she said, "to come down here as soon as she's had her breakfast, an' then we can all talk a while! Will you come in the kitchen as soon as you've tidied yourself. You can wash yourself upstairs in the bathroom. It's up at the head of the stairs!"

She left him and went to Jamesey's room. He was still asleep, and so she left him, and returned to the kitchen. "He'll be all the better of a long sleep," she said to herself, "an' mebbe it'll be as well for me to talk to him myself!"

They had breakfast together and then they waited in the parlour for Esther who came to them soon after they had risen from their meal. They

saw her as she passed the parlour-window, and Martha went to open the door for her. James heard them greeting each other, and then Esther, followed by Martha, entered the room. She tried to look unconcerned when she saw James sitting at the fire, but when she attempted to say "That's a fine mornin', the day!" her tongue seemed to get entangled in her mouth, and her words were wrecked against her teeth.

"Sit down, Esther!" Martha said gently, putting a chair for her at a distance from that on which James was sitting.

The comfortable easy air which had pervaded the room the previous evening was gone. Mrs. Luke had tidied the place, and the table now had its stiff, cold look of disuse. A pink epergne stood on a family Bible in the centre of the table, and books and Bibles and hymnals and albums of photographs and a portfolio of views of the Isle of Man were set at regular intervals round the edge of the table. The bedclothes had been removed from the sofa over the head of which was thrown a coloured woollen antimacassar. Esther noticed these details as her eye went round the room in any direction but that in which James was to be seen.

"Here," she heard Martha saying, "put your feet on that boss!"

She felt the carpet-covered footstool under her feet, and as she moved it so that it should be more comfortably placed for her, she said to Martha, "Is Jamesey all right, this mornin'?"

"He's still in his bed," Martha replied. "I didn't wake him. Now, the two of you," she

added sharply, "quit your sulkin' an' pretendin' you don't see one another!"

James stirred uneasily, and then began to light his pipe again although it had not gone out, and Esther, when she saw that he was as uncomfortable as she was, felt some courage coming into her heart.

"Yes, Martha!" she said quietly.

"There's no good of our goin' on this way," Mrs. Martin said. "We'll mebbe live a long while yet, an' I for one am not goin' through the world tryin' to remember which of you is fell out an' which of you is not. Here we are, the three of us, knowin' all there is to know, an' we have two childer to be thinkin' about, a young lad an' a young girl, an' we'd do well to be keepin' them in our mind, an' not to be runnin' about thinkin' of ourselves all the while!"

Esther nodded her head. "Sure, Martha," she said, "I'd do anything for Jamesey! . . ."

"What did you go an' tell him about you an' me for?" James demanded, taking his pipe out of his mouth and glaring at her.

Mrs. Martin moved his hand so that his pipe was restored to his mouth. "Smoke your pipe, man!" she said, "an' don't ask no questions that can't be answered!"

"The pair of you," she went on, "have a deal to be keepin' to yourselves, an' I daresay you don't want any of it spread about, but by the way you're goin' on you'd think you were anxious to let every one hear about it. You both did me harm. . . I never said much to you, James, about it, but I thought all the more. Still, there's no good rakin' all that up now. The smell'll go out of a rotten thing

if you leave it alone, but if you start pullin' it about an' exposin' it to the air, it'll only stink all the more. Yous is busy haulin' up your ould nastiness, an' tellin' every one to have a look at it ! . . ."

" I'm sure that's not what I want to do, Martha," Esther interrupted.

" It's mebbe not what you want to do. . . I don't suppose it is . . . but it's what you are doin' all the same. Makin' muck, that's all. Now, I want to talk to the pair of yous ! James here is dotin' about Aggie, an' you, Esther, are dotin' about Jamesey. Aggie doesn't know nothin' about the past, an' Jamesey does. Now, why don't you try an' live amicably, the two of yous. You need never see one another no more nor you can help, but when you do see each other, sure you can be civil about it ! " She turned to her husband. " Esther here is goin' to start a shop in Belfast . . . it was it we were lookin' at yesterday, an' Jamesey'll live with her if I can persuade him. You'll stop down in Ballyreagh where Aggie is. What more do you want ?

" But supposin' Jamesey tells Aggie ? . . ." James begun.

" Well, then, we'll have to try an' make Jamesey promise not to tell her," Mrs. Martin interrupted. " But how are we goin' to do it with you goin' about gettin' drunk. . . ."

" Sure, didn't I tell you I didn't mean to get drunk ! "

" There's many a person doesn't mean to do a thing, but they do it all the same. You'll have to redd your mind of ill-will against Esther, that's what you'll have to do, an' she'll have to redd her mind of ill-will against you. I'll take Jamesey

for a wee walk when he gets up, an' mebbe I'll be able to make him promise never to say a word to Aggie, but there'll have to be promises on both sides. You'll have to promise, James, not to interfere with Esther. There's no more nor that needed. Esther doesn't want to interfere with you!"

"I only want her to keep away from my childer!" he replied sullenly.

"Well, that's a want you'll not get supplied, my man! I like your cheek in talkin' about your childer! They're not yours—you done nothin' for them, but get them—they're my childer, an' if you're fond of Aggie, you'll only be let near her if you do as you're toul'!" She bent closer to him. "Listen here, James, I was near in mind to do what Jamesey wanted me to do, pack you back to America quick, for you looked as if you weren't goin' to be much good to me. I don't know that you are much good as it is. You do a few odd jobs about the shop, but Johnnie-look-up-at-the-moon used to do as much for far less trouble an' expense, an' it was a charity to let him do it, too, but it's no charity to let you do it!" He made a motion as if he would say something, but she would not let him speak. "No," she said, "you can just houl' your tongue for a change, an' listen to what I have to say. I want you to understand clearly what your value is to me an' all you belong to. It's just nothin', James! That's what it is! Just nothin'! If you were a man lookin' for a job, I wouldn't give you nine pence a week. Don't never get no ideas in your head that you're any use to me, for you're not, an' if ever you should think of runnin' away again an' leavin' me to look after myself, don't be upsettin'

yourself about it, an' wonderin' will I cry my eyes out for your loss or have to go into the poor-house or anything. Just go, James, if you want to, an' for dear sake don't hurry back ! "

She turned away from him and leant back in her chair. She did not speak for a second or two, but sat contemplating the fire as if she were thinking of what she should say next. Several times while she was speaking, he had made an angry movement, but the rush of her speech kept him still in his chair.

" Now," she resumed, " I think you understand what I think of you. Your goin' away wasn't such a loss as I thought at the time, an' your comin' back's no gain. If you stop with me you stop on my terms, an' not on your own, an' my terms are that you behave yourself about Esther. If you don't like them, you can walk out of the house this minute an' never put your nose anear my door again. If you do, I'll have you lifted by the peelers ! "

" That's no way to be talkin' to your man," he exclaimed, stung at last to outcry.

" Well, it's the way I'm goin' to talk to him. An' don't be shoutin' at the top of your voice or you'll wake Jamesey ! " she retorted.

" Jamesey ! " he sneered. " It's all Jamesey with you ! "

" Aye, James, it is. You may make up your mind about that. I don't want to make things hard for you . . . I'm not that kind . . . an' if you want to stay in my house you can easily do it. Esther here'll never say a word to Aggie about anything that's happened in the past, an' I'll not

say a word to her an' I'll make Jamesey promise he'll not. It'll mebbe happen one day that she'll hear about it, for there's plenty knows, but you'll have to be prepared for that. All I want you to do now is to promise you'll not interfere in any way with Esther. If Aggie ever asks to come up to Belfast to see her or stop with her, you'll not interfere in any way. I daresay the girl'll want to come up many's a time. She doesn't get much pleasure down in Ballyreagh, an' it'll be natural for her to expect to come an' stay with her aunt in Belfast where she can go an odd time to the theatre or the like of that. That's all you've got to do, James. You've got to behave to Esther as if there never was nothin' in your lives. Of course, there's to be no more drinkin'. I'm not goin' to give you money to spend on soakin' yourself. I'll not ask you to sign the pledge for I don't think that 'ud stop you from it, if your mind wasn't set on it, but you've got to stop it, or out you go ! "

" You forget," he said, " it was me give you the money to start the shop. . . ."

" Och, away an' divert yourself ! " she replied. She turned to Esther. " An' you, Esther, all I want you to do is not to go about the world with a face as long as the day an' the morrow. You'll have plenty to occupy your mind when you get the shop. . . . I've been thinkin' about it in the night, an' I'm sure you ought to take it, so you'd better go an' see the man in a day or two an' settle up with him . . . an' you're to try an' make Jamesey forget about what you toul' him. You'll only do that by forgettin' about it yourself. I may as well tell you, James, that Esther never

knew you run away from me until you come back, an' she had it in her mind that you might be the same when you come home as you were afore you went away ! . . ."

" She made the quare mistake ! " he said, laughing bitterly.

" Aye, she did, James, for when she saw you the night you come in, she saw you weren't worth the trouble of rememberin'. . . ."

" Are you goin' on like that all the time ? " he snapped at her.

" No, not all the time, only this mornin'. Whatever she had in her mind about you before you come back went clean out of it the minute she saw you, an' no wonder, for you looked the despair of the world. You're both disappointments, the pair of you, an' you'd better clean up your minds, an' start as if you never had a hope between you. Are you goin' to do as I ask ? "

" An' what about her ? " he said, pointing at Esther.

" I'll do whatever Martha bids me," Esther replied.

" There, you hear that, James ? " exclaimed Mrs. Martin.

He sat with his head bent forward and tapped his pipe on the fender. They waited for him to speak, and watched him as they waited.

" Well ? " said Mrs. Martin.

" All right ! " he said. " I'll promise not to interfere with her if you'll make Jamesey promise not to tell Aggie ! "

" Very well, then," Mrs. Martin replied. " An' now you can just go down to the station an' get the first train back to Ballyreagh."

He looked doubtfully at her for a few moments,

and then he did as she told him. He put on his cap, and prepared to leave the house.

"Have you any money?" she asked.

"I have my return ticket," he answered.

"Have you no money as well?"

"I have a few coppers!"

"I don't suppose you'll need anything til you get home, but I don't like to think of a man goin' about without some silver in his pocket. Here you are!"

She handed some money to him.

"I don't need it," he said.

"Never mind," she replied, "it'll please you to know you have it."

He went out of the room without speaking to Esther, and Mrs. Martin did not call him back to say "Good-bye" to her. She thought that such greetings and farewells should come from him without suggestion.

"I'm away now," he said, opening the door and stepping into the street.

"All right, James," Mrs. Martin answered, holding the door. "Tell Aggie we're all well, an' you'd better tell her her Aunt Esther was askin' after her, an' say I'll be home on Saturday anyway, an' mebbe before!"

He nodded his head and went off. She shut the door quickly, and when he looked round no one was gazing after him waving farewells. He hurried down the road, and when he saw a tram passing the end of it he ran to catch it, shouting to the conductor as he ran. He climbed to the top of the car, and sat down.

"It's the quare take-down," he said to himself, as the car carried him into the city.

CHAPTER XXIII

Esther had left the house when Jamesey came down, and Mrs. Martin did not speak to him of his father or of his aunt. She said only that his father had returned to Ballyreagh and that he was sorry for the trouble he had made. In the afternoon she called at Esther's lodgings, and they both went over to Ballymacarrett to spy on the shop. They watched outside for a while, noting the number of customers who entered it at what they judged to be a slack hour, and then Martha took Esther a little way up the Albert Bridge Road to where there was a confectioner's shop.

"We'll go in here," she said, "an' have our tay, an' while we're havin' it, we'll ask the woman what kind of trade Ferguson does. It looks all right to me, but there's no harm in makin' as sure as you can!"

"She'll mebbe not tell us nothin'!" Esther replied. "I wouldn't like myself to be asked questions about other people's business by strangers!"

"Now, wheesht!" Mrs. Martin exclaimed, "an' watch the way I ask her. It'll learn you how to do it for yourself when you need it another time!"

She entered the shop and rapped on the counter.

"Can we have our tea here?" she said to the

woman who answered. She did not say "tay" because she was out, and one does not say "tay" except when one is at home or with friends. In the presence of strangers or superior company, one says "tea."

"You can just!" the woman answered. "What'll I serve you with. There's ninepenny teas an' sixpenny, or would you just rather have a pot of tea an' some cookies!"

Mrs. Martin consulted with Esther, and then she asked what was given for ninepence.

"It's an ordinary tea with soda bread and oatmeal cakes an' loaf bread if you want it, an' crumpets an' butter an' jam an' whatever you fancy in the way of pastry!" was the reply she received.

"Och, well, I think we'll have the ninepenny tea, then. I feel in need of my tea, an' I daresay you do too, Esther!" She turned to the woman and added, "I suppose you haven't any potato farls?"

"Och, I have not," she replied. "I'm quaren sorry. We didn't bake any the day—there's only the soda bread. There's bap, if you like it!"

"Bap's not bad," said Mrs. Martin. "I will have some. It's a pity you haven't any potato farls, though!"

"I'm right an' sorry about it," said the woman. "I could get you some from the baker's, if you were partic'lar wantin' them!"

Mrs. Martin shook her head. "No," she said, "don't bother yourself. I don't like potato bread from bakers' shops somehow. It's never the same as the homemade kind!"

"Indeed an' you're right," the woman replied. "They don't get the quality in it the same way, an' of course it's not to be expected the way they make it. I'll not be a minute bringin' in the tea!"

The woman went out of the shop to her kitchen, but almost immediately returned.

"Mebbe you'd like to come an' have it in the warm," she said, "instead of there in the shop. Some people doesn't like takin' their food where people can see them!"

"It's quaren kind of you," Mrs. Martin replied, and she and Esther followed her into the kitchen.

In a little while they were eating the food that was given to them—the lightest of soda bread and a pleasant bap, which is a small light loaf of the shape of a diamond, and soft, yielding crumpets and little buttered cookies; and while they ate it they talked to the woman of the house.

"That's the nicest soda cake I've tasted this long while," Mrs. Martin said.

"It is nice," Esther added.

"I'm quaren glad you like it. Will you have a bit more if I fetch it out of the pan for you!"

"Thank you, I would like some more. . . . Could you tell me is there a hardware shop near by?" she added when the woman returned to the kitchen from the scullery.

"There's one down the road, the name of Ferguson."

"Is it a good shop?"

"Aye, it is. It's the best shop on the road as far as I know. It's the only place I deal myself!"

Mrs. Martin held out her hand for Esther's cup. "You'll have a wee drop more tea, Esther?"

" Thank you, Martha, I will ! " Esther answered, passing her cup to her sister.

" I daresay he does a good trade, Mr. Whatyou-maycallhim—Ferguson ? " Mrs. Martin said as she filled Esther's cup and returned it to her.

" Indeed, he does. He has the best trade of anyone here in the hardware line, anyway. I wouldn't wonder but he'd be right an' well off. His wife and him have no children—they're Scotch or something—an' they just do rightly ! "

" Ah, well," Mrs. Martin said, " it's well to be them that has it ! "

" You're right," the woman answered, and then they spoke of other things, and later Martha and Esther left the shop and walked down the Albert Bridge Road, towards the Lagan.

" Do you know, Esther," Mrs. Martin said, as they approached the shop, " I think if I was you I'd go in now an' bargain with him ! "

" Would you, Martha ? "

" Aye, I would, indeed. Offer him fifty pounds less nor he wants, and then split the differs with him, but don't budge a penny more unless I give a cough, an' then you can give him what he asks. Come on in ! "

They entered the shop and waited until Mr. Ferguson had served two customers, and then they began to bargain with him. . . . She did not cough. Esther bought the business by splitting " the differs."

" Do you feel proud of yourself ? " Mrs. Martin said, as they walked home, " to be ownin' a shop that's far bigger nor ever I owned ? "

" I would feel proud of myself," Esther replied, " if I had Jamesey stoppin' with me ! "

"Well, you'll mebbe have more nor that one day. Here's a tram comin'! Hurry up or we'll not catch it. Hi, mister! . . ."

Esther did not go into the house with her sister.

"You'd better go on up home, Esther," Mrs. Martin said. "Jamesey's quare-tempered, an' it doesn't do to be puttin' yourself too much in his way. I haven't said anything to him yet, an' I'm not goin' to say anything for a wee while because it's better to let him turn things over in his mind, an' not have them turned over for him. I'll just tell him you've bought the shop. That'll be enough for him to sleep on. I'll come with you the morrow to make arrangements about takin' it over. I'd get into it as quick as you can, if I was you. You'll not be lonesome, will you, the night, not havin' no one to talk til?"

"Och, no, Martha, not very. . . ."

"Well, go to bed early then, for you've had a long day, an' a tirin' one, an' in the mornin' you'll be nice an' fresh. We'll go down to the Junction thegether, an' buy thon cape an' bonnet we saw in the Bank window. I've just set my heart on them both, an' I might as well buy somethin' tasty now I'm up here for dear only knows when I'll be back again!"

"Have you settled when you're goin' to Ballyreagh, Martha?" Esther asked.

"I'll go on Saturday if God spares me. Goodnight to you, Esther, an' don't go an' bother your head about anything! . . ."

When Saturday morning came she called to Jamesey who was upstairs in his bedroom.

"Come down a minute," she said, "I want you!" He came as she bade him.

"What is it?" he said, as he entered the parlour.

"I want you to take me a walk," she replied, "I'm goin' home the day. . . ."

"Och, can't you stop a while longer?" he said reproachfully.

"No," she replied, "I've been here long enough. Dear knows what's happened to the shop since I've been away. I wouldn't be surprised if it's all away to wreck an' ruin!"

"Where'll I take you?" he said going into the hall to get his cap.

"Wherever you like, son, only not in the town. Some quiet place where I can sit down beside you!"

She had bought the bonnet and cape on which she had set her heart, and while he was in the hall she put them on. When he came back to the parlour she was standing before the overmantel tying the ribbons of the bonnet beneath her chin.

"For dear sake, ma!" he exclaimed, "what are you puttin' on you?"

"It's a bonnet, son!"

"Ah, but, ma! . . ."

"Isn't it time I started wearin' them, an' me gettin' ould!"

"Sure, you're not that ould!" he remonstrated with her.

"I'm ould enough to be your ma, anyway," she replied, "an' you're a big lump of a lad now. You're near a man . . . mebbe you think you are a man!"

"Ah, don't be coddin' me, ma!"

She had tied the ribbons neatly in a bow, and she came to him and shook his arm.

"I'm not coddin' you, son," she said, smiling at him. "You are a man, an' it's only right I should show I'm an ould woman!"

"I don't like you in a bonnet," he replied. "Where's the hat you had on you yesterday?"

"Hats is for young women, son, an' not for women my age. I bought the cape an' the bonnet a day or two ago an' I kept them to wear the day. They'll think my fortune's made when I get intil Ballyreagh. . . ."

But Jamesey sulked and would not be content until she had taken the sign of age from her head and put on her hat with the ribbons and the bobbing feather.

"Were you ever up the Cave Hill?" he asked her, as they walked down the tiled path leading from the door to the pavement.

"I never was up it in my life," she replied.

"Will I take you up it?" he said.

"I'm not much of a climber," she answered.

"I'll take you up a way that's not hard. There's a grand view from it. You would think you could see the whole world in front of you. An' it's a fine day, too. Look at the day, ma!"

There was a great stretch of blue sky overhead, lightened here and there by little fleecy clouds. The sun was shining strongly, but a soft cool wind tempered his heat.

"Aye, the day's fine enough," Mrs. Martin said. "We'll go up the hill, son!"

He led her down the road to the Antrim Road,

and then they took a tram. When they descended from it, they walked a short way until they came to a gap through which they passed, and then they began the ascent of the hill.

"There was a girl an' a fellow killed themselves here one time," Jamesey said. "They were in love with one another, an' they jumped down an' were mangled! . . ."

"Ochone, son!"

"Aye, it was a quare pity of them!"

She paused to get her breath, and he made her sit down for a while.

"You see, son," she said, smiling at him, "it's time I begun wearin' a bonnet. I mind the time I could 'a' run up this hill. . . ."

"Ah, now, ma, don't be lettin' on you were that smart on your feet!"

She pretended to be angry with him. "Are you tellin' your ould mother she's a liar?" she said.

"Ah, quit!" he replied, and then he hugged her.

"That's no way to be goin' on with every one lookin' at you, Jamesey!" she said in expostulation.

"Sure, no one'll see us, an' if they do, I don't care!"

She got up from the grassy bank, and began to climb again.

"Come on," she urged, "or we'll never get near the top!"

He pointed to a steep place on the side of the Hill, and said, "That's where they leaped, them two I was tellin' you about!"

"Ah, God spare them," she said in pity. "Dear

knows what they had on their minds. It's a pity of anyone that's in the bother they must 'a' been in. They must 'a' been demented surely. To be standin' there with all the loveliness of God in their eyes, an' them resolvin' to kill themselves. Ah, it's fearful, son, it's fearful! Mind your step now . . . there's a hole in the ground here!"

He held her hand to keep her from going on. "Wait til I get in front of you," he said, "an' then I'll help you up. It'll mebbe be easier that way!"

They climbed up the hill in that fashion, Jamesey holding her hand and hauling her over the stiff places, until they reached the top, and then they sat down exhausted on the grass to rest a while.

"You wouldn't find a nicer place nor this anywhere, would you, ma?" Jamesey said at last, looking round him as he spoke.

"You would not, son!" she replied.

He stood up, and offered his hand to her.

"Come over here," he said, "til I show you McArt's Fort!"

They stumbled through the bracken and heather until they came to the fort with earthen walls where McArt had fought. They could see the city lying below hidden by a curtain of smoke. The chimney shafts shot up into the sky, sending out black rolling clouds, and across the river they could see the gantries and stocks and cranes and hulks of ships at the Island.

"That's the Town Hall!" said Jamesey, pointing to the dome of the new building in the central square of the city. "You ought to go in that place one time," he added. "There's marble

all over it, an' picters of the Lord Mayors since ever there was one ! "

She did not answer. She looked gravely on the sights spread out before her eyes. Here, close under the hill, was Belfast Castle. There was the Lough reaching up to the roaming river and out to the Irish Sea. . . .

" Them's the Twin Islands, ma ! " Jamesey said to her, eager to inform her of all the sights.

" Aye, son ! " she said indifferently.

And there was the low-lying shore of Down where her life had been spent. That place over there was Hollywood. People used to make jokes about the foreshore. . . . And there was Helen's Bay, and beyond that was Bangor, and then round the point, past the Copeland Islands, was Ballyreagh. The sea would be tumbling over the rocks there, and the yellow sea-weed would lift and fall with a loud swish-swish. . . . Aggie and James were there this minute. . . .

" It's a gran' view," she said suddenly.

" Aye, ma, it is ! " Jamesey asserted.

He took hold of her hand again and bade her come with him a little way. They left the fort and walked across a field, and then he stood shading his eyes, and asked her what she could see.

" Is it water ? " she asked.

" Aye. Do you not see it plain ? It's Lough Neagh, that ! You can see it from here ! "

She held her hand over her eyebrows and looked towards the sheet of shining water lying in a heat haze far off.

" Many's a time I've read about that," she said,

" an' never seen it. An' them's the hills of Antrim, I suppose ? "

She indicated the long, dark heap of hills that stretched away beyond the range of the eye.

" Aye, that's them right enough ! Are you not glad I brought you here ? "

" Aye, son, I am ! "

" I'll take you one time to see Lough Neagh if you want to go. I daresay you'll be able to go wee trips now more nor you used to . . . now Aggie can look after the shop, an' has my da to help her ! "

He spoke of his father without bitterness, though his voice hesitated as he did so, and its note became deeper.

" Aye," she replied. " I will. I would like rightly to see Lough Neagh ! I mind well when I was a wee girl goin' to school, I was toul' if you would put a piece of wood in the Lough, an' left it there a while, a year, mebbe, it would be turned into stone ! "

" Were you toul' that, too, ma. Sure, I was learned that. I went one time with a lot of fellows when I first come up to Belfast, an' I put a piece of wood in, an' tied it to the shore with cord, but when I went back I couldn't mind where I had left it. . . . I believe it's true all the same. The water petrifies it. You'll see bits in the Museum. . . ."

They walked slowly back to McArt's Fort, and sat there gazing down on the city beneath them.

" It's a gran' city, Belfast, Jamesey ! "

" Aye, it is, ma ! "

She waved her hand towards the shipyards. " All them people there hammerin' away thegether

an' makin' big boats to sail the world. That's gran' ! "

" You're right, ma ! "

" An' the friendlier they are, Jamesey, the better the boats they build, isn't it, son ? "

" I daresay that's true enough. It's a terrible pity the way some of them fights over religion ! "

She laid her hand on his. " It's a pity to be fightin' over anything, Jamesey. There's such strange things in the world, son, you can never understand them, an' you'd better just leave them alone. Many's a time a thing'll be done or said, mebbe, an' you'll wonder what caused it, an' perhaps you'll be inclined to lose your temper over the head of it, but, son-a-dear, that'll not make it any better. . . ."

" Ah, but sure it's natural, ma ! . . ."

" I know, son, I know well, but that doesn't help, does it ? I'm an ould woman, Jamesey, an' you're a headstrong young lad, an' things mebbe seems plain to you that seems quare complicated to me. I daresay I was like you when I was young, an' thought the same as you think, but I've tholed too much, Jamesey, not to know that things can't be unravelled just like a ball of yarn that's run under the table an' got twisted. I know rightly what's in your mind, son, about your da' an' your Aunt Esther, an' I understand it, too, but, son-a-dear, what's your sufferin' to your Aunt Esther's ? . . . I don't speak about your da, I just speak of her. She done me harm, bitter harm, son, an' many's a time I felt I could 'a' choked her for it, but whatever I suffered through her, she's suffered ten times over through herself. I could

near be sorry for her that James didn't take her with him when I think of the sore disappointment he's been to her. . . ."

"Ma, how can you speak that way, an' her doin' what she done. Your own sister an' your own man!"

"It sounds fearful, doesn't it, son? An' it is fearful! I don't know why it is I don't feel more upset about it . . . but somehow, Jamesey, I don't."

"You don't care for my da, that's why!"

"How would I care for him?" she said with some bitterness in her voice. "I don't feel nothin' about him, not even contempt, Jamesey. He's a man in my house that does things about the shop, that's all. Now an' a while I mind that he's your da. . . ."

"I don't own him!"

"But he is your da, Jamesey, an' he's Aggie's da. I think to myself many's a time it's a pity of him, too, to be doin' what he liked all his life, an' then at the end of it all to be afeard of a bit of a girl. You might pity him, too, Jamesey!"

"I want nothin' to do with him. I would throw him out of the house if I was you!"

"Aye, son, but you're not, you see! Look now, at that boat comin' down the Lough!"

They watched a cross-Channel steamer moving slowly away from the city, gathering speed as she moved, and churning the sea into a trail of white foam. They could hear the dull thud of her propellers even on that high hill.

"I love to watch a boat," she said. "It's a proud thing!"

"It is," he answered. "That boat'll be goin' to Glasgow, I expect!"

"Look at the wee boats about the Lough, Jamesey. Over thonder, do you see? Wee boats with white sails. Do you mind the time I took you on the long car to Bangor to see the Regatta, an' you near cried your eyes out because you couldn't go on one of the yachts!"

He laughed at her recollection. "Aye, ma, I do!" he answered.

"Ha, you were a wilful child, Jamesey! Wantin' this an' wantin' that. Just like your da!"

His smile left his face, and the sullen look came back.

"I needn't mean to offend you, Jamesey, son, but it's true, dear. Mebbe it'll console you to know that you've somethin' of me in you, too!"

"I'm like you in everything," he exclaimed. "I'm not like him. I'm like you, so I am!"

"No, son, I'm friends with your Aunt Esther, an' you're not, nor is your da. He walked out of the house the day he went home, an' he never as much as said "Good-bye!" to her. You don't talk to her either! That's like your da, son!"

"Aye, you're makin' me out in the wrong!"

"No, Jamesey, dear, I'm not. . . . Thonder's the Hollywood Hills. They look quaren close to, the day. That means there'll be rain, doesn't it? I was always toul' that when I was a child! . . ."

He did not answer, nor did she say any more to him for a long while. They sat together on the grass looking down on that great town that might be the loveliest city in the world, but is too full of

ancient tumult and dull bigotries and old rages to shape itself after the pattern that the winds and the sea and the roaming river and the high hills have made for it. Mrs. Martin let the light wind lap her as it would. The warm glow of the sun fell around her, and the genial airs brightened her eyes and brought the colour to her cheeks.

"It's sweet air," she said, without looking round.

He did not answer, but sat moodily gazing in front of him. His eyes were bent on the mantle of smoke lying over Belfast, but he did not see it. His mind was not lying on the activities that lay swarming at the feet of that hill. He looked into the smoke that poured from furnaces and mill-chimneys, and saw the dismal eyes of his Aunt Esther on that day at Millisle when he and she had tumbled over the sea-weed on the rocks, and he had fled from her through the dusk to Ballyreagh. He could see her quite plainly there in that moving ball of black cloud. She was running after him. calling to him as she ran, but he would not make any answer nor would he stop; and then she caught up to him, and put her arms round his neck, and drew his face down to hers. He could almost hear her telling him that she loved him . . . and he had pitied her, and kissed her hair . . . and then he had gone from her, and hate had grown up in his heart. . . .

His mother was speaking to him.

"Jamesey, son," she said, "we'll have to be goin'!"

"Aye, ma!" he said, standing up and helping her to rise.

"It'll be quare work gettin' down," she said.

" I think there's an easier way over there," he said, pointing inland. " I noticed it as we were lookin' at Lough Neagh a while ago ! "

They walked towards the new way down the hillside, and as they did so, she asked him to promise that he would never tell his sister anything of the story of his aunt and his father.

" He's set his heart on her," she said, " an' he's promised not to interfere with your Aunt Esther if you'll agree not to tell Aggie ! "

He was more amenable than she had expected. He promised readily.

" That's right, Jamesey ! " she said, pressing his arm in hers.

They came down the hill and found themselves at the end of the Limestone Road.

" We'll just have time for a bite to ate," she said, " an' then I'll have to get my train ! " She looked at his face quickly, and then added, " I wonder if your Aunt Esther's in her lodgin's. Mebbe, she'd come an' have a bite with us ! " He did not reply. " Will we call an' see on our way home ? " she asked.

" Aye, if you like ! " he answered.

" I would like her to come an' see me off," she added. " It'll mebbe be a wee while afore I see her again ! "

They walked up to the door of the house in which Esther was staying.

" Do you mind, Jamesey ? " she asked, as they did so.

" No, ma ! " he replied.

CHAPTER XXIV

ESTHER and Jamesey went to the station with her to see her off. She talked to them very gaily as they rode on the tramcar to Station Street and while they waited for the train to start.

"Will I buy you anything to read, ma?" Jamesey said to her as they passed the bookstall.

"Och, no, son! Sure, what's the good of ould papers?"

Esther had seen Mr. Ferguson about the shop, and had been told that she could take possession immediately.

"It'll be a lot of work for you, Esther?" Mrs. Martin said, when she heard the news.

"Aye, it will, Martha!"

"Aye, it'll be a lot of work. Mebbe, Jamesey would be willin' to lend you a hand. . . ."

Esther did not answer. She looked away from her sister and her nephew, and waited for him to reply. It seemed to her that it was years before he made an answer.

"I'll help you, Aunt Esther!" he said quietly.

She turned to him. . . .

"What are you cryin' for?" Mrs. Martin demanded of her. "Here, come in here for a minute, an' don't let anyone see you standin' there girnin'. Dear, dear, dear, here's a nice thing! A big

woman like you! . . . All right, Jamesey, son! Just run up and down the platform for a wee while. I'll call you in a minute!"

Jamesey backed out of the carriage, and stood forlornly about.

"There, now, Esther dear, don't be cryin' any more. You've got your desire, haven't you, an' what more do you want? Lift up your face, will you, till I dry your eyes." She dabbed her handkerchief in Esther's face. "There, now, quit it! You'll have me cryin' myself in a wee while, an' a nice spectacle that would be. Are you all right again? . . ."

Esther dried her eyes, and then leant back in her seat.

"I didn't mean to cry, Martha! . . ."

"No, dear, none of us never does mean to! They say it does you good to be cryin' now an' again, an' mebbe it does, so we'll say no more about that, but just brighten up your eyes now, an' put a smile on your lips, for I'm goin' to call Jamesey back!" She went to the door of the carriage as she spoke, and called to her son, who came up when he saw her beckoning to him.

"Your aunt's tired after her work at the shop, Jamesey, an' I want you to make her go home an' take a rest for a wee while. Mebbe, you an' her'll go somewhere to the night, to a theatre or somethin'. . . ."

"I don't want to go to a theatre," Esther exclaimed.

"Well, indeed, then," Mrs. Martin said, "from the look of the picters on the hoardin's, I don't wonder at you. Nothin' but girls kickin' up their

legs, an' men stabbin' one another, that's all I seen on the bills any time ever I was here. There's mebbe a concert or somethin' you can go to. Whatever there is, Jamesey, just you take her with you, an' I'll stan' treat to you ! "

A porter came to examine tickets, and when he found that Jamesey and Esther were not travelling by the train, he demanded that they should step on to the platform.

" Ah, sure, there's no hurry, mister," Mrs. Martin said. " You haven't got near ready yet if I know anything of this line. Content yourself, man, an' when you are startin' come an' tell us, an' we'll see what we can do for you ! "

Jamesey and Esther got out of the carriage, and closed the door. Mrs. Martin leant over the window, and talked to them as if there never had been any trouble between them.

" You're a bit different lookin', Jamesey," she said, " from what you were when I come up to you ! "

" Aye, I feel different," he replied.

The guard called out to the driver, and then blew his whistle.

" We're goin' ! " Mrs. Martin exclaimed, and she caught hold of Esther and then of Jamesey and kissed them. " Mind you take care of yourselves," she added, " an' don't go an' get into no bothers. Jamesey'll live with you, Esther, in the shop ! I'll come up again in a wee while to see how you're gettin' on. I'll write you a line soon . . . God love you, daughter ! . . ."

She stood at the window, waving to them until the train rolled out of sight, and then she sat down.

" Well, now ! " she exclaimed, and then she did not speak again.

It was not quite dusk when she arrived at Ballyreagh. The sun was riding down the heavens to the horizon, throwing up red shafts of light as he went down, and she stood for a few moments at the sea-wall to watch the traffic of the sea. Then she went along the road, past her shop, and turned up the lane that led to the Moat. She did not desire to go home immediately. She wished to go somewhere and sit quietly by herself for a while. There was no one at the Moat when she climbed the little hill on which it stands, and she said to herself that she was glad of the loneliness. She sat down on the wooden seat, where hundreds of men and women had carved their names and initials, and watched the sun go down. It was such a little while ago since she had last climbed this hill and sat here wondering on her fate ; but it seemed as if years had elapsed since then. Then she had been full of desire and expectation. " Just like a wonderin' young girl ! " she said to herself. " Now I'm an ould woman wearin' a bonnet an' a cape, an' I have no thought about James at all ! "

The sun set and the dusk slowly spread over the heavens, and the little boats that rocked to and fro on the tide lost their shape and soon were hid. The lamps in the lighthouse were lit, and here and there she could see a light shining from the cottages. Out in the darkness little lights went slipping by showing where the great boats went through the sea.

" It's quaren quare ! " she said to herself, as she

got up from her seat, and prepared to go home. The loveliness of the sunset and the dark clustering beauty of the night, besprinkled with stars and radiant moonshine, filled her mind with peace and yet made her feel sad. She, too, had had longings, and she, too, had lost all that she had desired, but what was the good of mourning? Things happen, and they cannot be changed. She reached the bottom of the Moat hill, and then walked along the lane leading to her home. There was no one in the house when she reached it.

"Aggie an' James'll still be at the shop," she said to herself. "I'd better be gettin' their tay ready for them!"

She lit the lamp, and then took the bellows and blew the fire into a blaze.

"Aye," she said to herself, "they'll want their tay when they come in!"

She spread the table-cloth on the table, and then went to the dresser to get the cups.

"Och, ochone!" she said a little wearily, as she laid them on the table.

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